

Public Safety Service Consolidation

Lisa Burley

Abstract

The discussions revolving around public safety consolidation has long been debated among public officials. It is a fact that public safety expenditures are the largest financial outlay for local communities. Studies have shown a decrease in costs, an increase in level of service, reduction in duplication of services, faster response time and expanded knowledge base. There appear to be both benefits and challenges on this issue. On the reverse side some skeptics say that the service level is diminished and autonomy and small community identity is lost. Some questions if the cost savings and increased effectiveness is worth the perception of loss of control. This paper will analyze if there is a cost savings in policing services, expanded training and knowledge for our public safety servants and most importantly; community support for further consolidation of certain services. Community members in Highlands County were surveyed to determine their view on the level of safety in their community and if there was acceptance for current consolidation and support for further consolidation of services. Clearly the respondents feel safe in their community, supports further consolidation and surprisingly the majority agrees services are in line with taxes. Public safety service ranked the highest of all public services.

Introduction

With the exception of the last several years, public safety service funding has historically been protected from severe budget cuts based on public priority. Due to the continuous economic decline, funding of services is no longer guaranteed, and in fact, most public safety agencies, including law enforcement have been subject to critical budget reductions. Around the state and nation, there is a stark reduction in the number of employees in government positions, and programs and services are being reduced and or eliminated. Since public safety takes up a large portion of government budgets, this discipline has become a prime target as government leaders look for ways to reduce costs to the taxpayers.

Some of the collateral damage is that although resources in public safety are being reduced, the need for ever increasing service stays constant. "Not only are new responses to old problems required, but police departments have become virtual dumping grounds for problems previously handled by other entities which have been eliminated or, at the very least, had their funding slashed." (NJSACOP 2007).

As society becomes more complex, so does the need to improve and increase public safety service levels to deal effectively with all the issues that come along with domestic security, cyber threats, terrorism and the most recent rash of school violence.

Since the economic downturn of 2008 and 2009, local governments throughout the state of Florida and nationwide have begun to look at consolidating, merging, and sharing public safety services. Many have actually made the transition.

This research will focus on the issue of consolidation at a local level. Through the process it is anticipated that we will be able to determine if the findings are perceived verses realistic; additionally, if there are true benefits and cost savings. Various methods of consolidations will be reviewed to attempt to determine if there is any correlation between certain methods that meld best with unique community characteristics.

The research will be analyzed based on the recent consolidation (shared services) that has occurred in Highlands County, Florida. We are one hundred percent consolidated in our E-911 dispatch for police, fire, emergency medical services for dispatching calls. Also, our most recent contractual service is with a local police agency to provide law enforcement services. The research will measure the success from an agency standpoint and from a community satisfaction standpoint.

Literature Review

Statistical Background Data

A comprehensive symposium was held in September 2011 to determine if there could potentially be a cost savings in consolidating certain public safety services due to the economic recession of 2008 and 2009.

As of May 2012, the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University has confirmed 130 agencies with some form or consolidation in the field of public safety services. These agencies are spread across over 25 states. The research tends to show that success is more prevalent in small and medium size agencies in both rural and urban communities. It was noted in the writings that some agencies that had gone to consolidation had abandoned it, but there was not valid verification on record at the time of this research. (Wilson & Grammich, BOLO 1- 2012)

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2009, more than \$80 billion dollars was spent on police services across the country, while more than \$40 billion was spent on fire services. Typically about 80% of local public budgets are made up of public safety personnel costs and much of that is made up of pension costs and driven by labor contracts which are problematic when it comes to managing your staffing and your resources. (Wilson & Grammich, BOLO 2- 2012)

The fire industry has evolved from fire suppression to greater provision of emergency medical services. From 1983 to 2010, the number of fires to which fire departments responded decreased by 43 percent nationwide this number is 59 percent down from 1977) (NFPA 2011a). At the same time, the number of career firefighters increased 48 percent, and the number of fire departments increased 7 percent (NFPA 2011b). While there are more firefighters to fight fewer fires, medical-aid calls increased 260 percent from 1980 to 2010 (NFPA 2011c) (Wilson & Grammich, BOLO 2- 2012)

Much of the data above is the driving forces for many agencies desperate to find alternative modes and methods for dealing with the standard budget reductions that have traditionally been used to balance budgets. Rather than hiring freezes, layoffs, furloughs, or even cutting service and programs, agencies are looking at more bold and experimental type of service consolidation to provide continuity of services through various methods. (Wilson & Grammich, BOLO 1 & BOLO 2- 2012).

Traditionally, communities have held a deep emotional attachment to its local police departments making the discussion of merging services difficult. Those barriers divided various community groups and inhibited open discussion of pure fact versus the fear of losing local control and identity. The typical overview was that there was one winner and one loser, when in fact in certain situations; consolidation breathed financial life into communities where it has been successful. Understanding and quantifying the financial impacts along with the potential benefits should be equally weighed in comparison to the common dissent of losing a piece of the community's history. (Sotebeer 2013).

Benefits

Some of the benefits noted in the consolidation of the various literatures were as follows: the need for reduced staffing due to staffing duplication by both cross training, efficiency in provision of public safety services, reduced administration, and communication services. Some staff is taking larger roles in the agencies which dictate additional cross training in various disciplines thus expanding individual knowledge of staff members. You will quite often notice an enhancement in community policing in certain situations when public safety is integrated and becomes everyone's responsibility within the merge of departments. Communities often experience an increase in comprehensive community safety and homeland security by enhancing the communication between the various public safety entities. (Wilson & Grammich, 2013) (Stelter 2013).

Types

General definitions for consideration of consolidation of any services are defined as:

- **Shared Services:** Two or more agencies combine certain functional units, such as emergency communications, SWAT, dispatch, or records.
- **Local Merger/Consolidation:** Two separate police agencies form a single new unit. **Regionalization:** A number of jurisdictions combine to police a geographic area rather than a jurisdictional one. The new entity does not contain elements of any existing agency – either the jurisdictions had no previously-existing police department, or those that existed have been decommissioned (disbanded).
- **Contract Services:** A formal contract to pay for law enforcement services provided by one jurisdiction to another or others. (NJSACOP 2007).

Specific integration of police and fire consolidation is explained in an interview where Leischen Stetler interviewed Jeremy M. Wilson.

1. Full consolidation: The full integration of police and fire services, where public safety officers are cross-trained in both police and fire services with a consolidated management and command.
2. Partial consolidation: A partial integration of police and fire services, where cross-trained public safety officers work alongside separate police and fire personnel, and consolidation is limited to select positions within the organization's hierarchy.
3. Functional consolidation: Where police and fire services are not integrated but consolidation occurs within middle or upper management.
4. Nominal consolidation: Where police and fire services are not integrated, there are no cross-trained public safety officers, but in which separate police and fire services may share facilities or training and dispatch resources and a public safety director may oversee separate police and fire services.
(Wilson & Grammich, BOLO 2- 2012)

Not One Size Fits All: It is important to note that consideration of any type of consolidation/merger effort has to take into consideration all aspects of community needs and expectations. Studies have shown that where there is typically a significant cost savings, the initial implementation could result in a negative effect for the short term. Strong political pressures are sure to be a part of most if not all consolidation efforts. Even though a small tight knit community might seem more resistant to that type of change, it is shown throughout various research and testimonies, that size does not matter if strong operations policies are in place, good personnel relationships are built, and excellent and balanced administrative staff is in place. (Stelter 2013).

Countywide Consolidated Communication for E-911

In Highlands County in the last several years, a complete merging and consolidation has taken place of the Emergency 911 Center which included several agencies. The County requested that appointed public safety staff conduct a research and review regarding the issue of county-wide consolidated communications. The consensus of the group was that the findings were positive and would provide improved efficiency of service as well as a reduction in the cost of services. Some basic findings were:

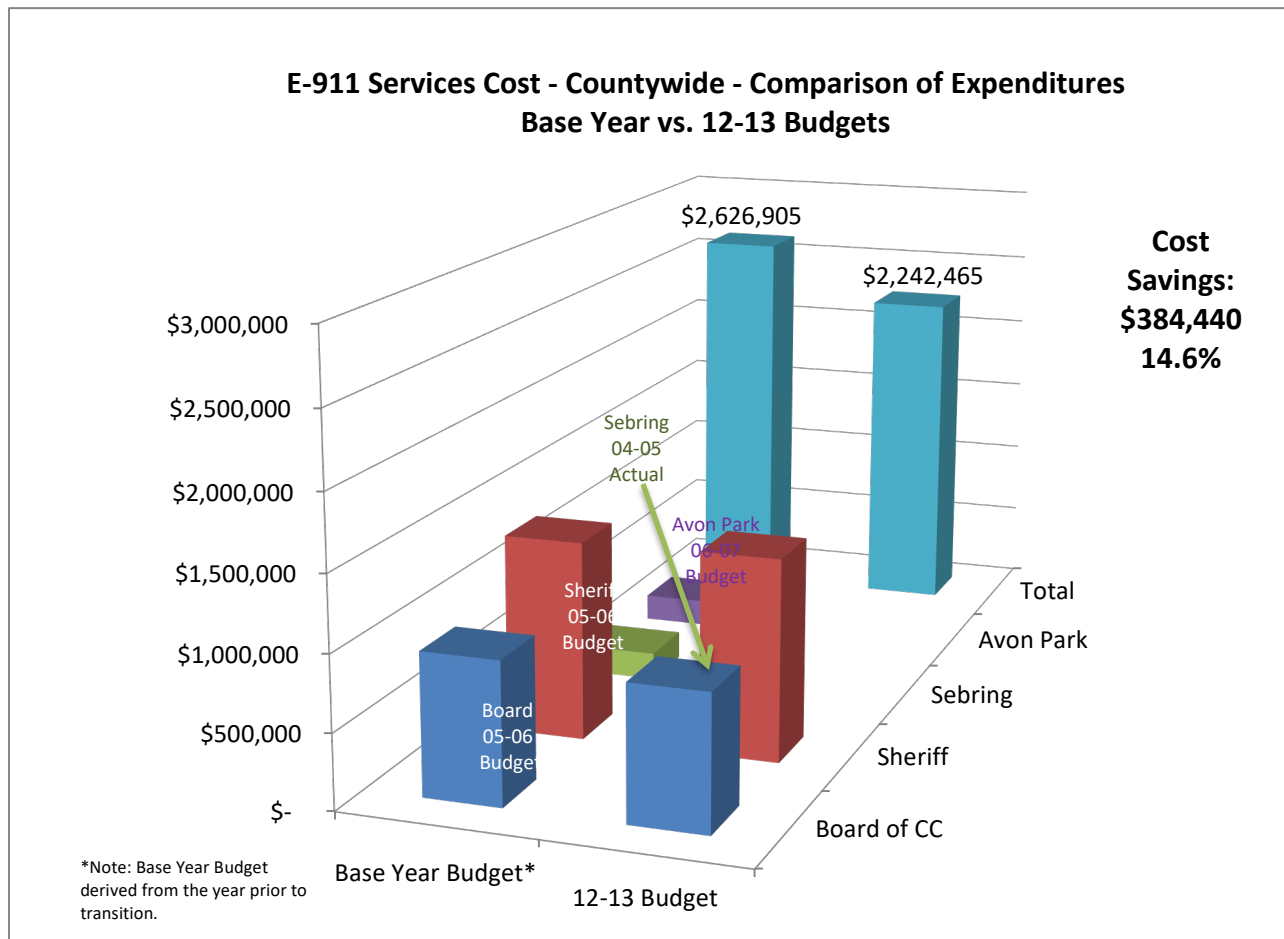
- The elimination of call transfers. Callers would only have the need to tell their story one time, the call taker would electronically transfer data to the dispatch stations and real time simultaneous dispatching of fire, EMS and/or law enforcement would take place, thus reducing response time.
- There would be personnel consolidation. The total number of communications center staff among all agencies in 2005 during consideration of consolidation was 51. The minimum proposed consolidated staffing would be 36, a savings estimated at approximately \$615,000 for fire, EMS, and law enforcement. The second option, should law enforcement consolidate to the Sheriff's Office and fire and EMS to the County EOC, the total of 51 would be reduced to 40 (28 at the

SO and 12 at EOC), with and estimated savings of approximately \$533,000 in personal services. Either option would have shown a reduction in staffing; ultimately creating a savings that would allow further consolidation of the cities to create a pass along savings during the budget crisis.

- There would be significant savings in equipment cost and maintenance, phone lines, training, and system upgrades.
- Lastly, the issue of access to and the sharing of data software among all agencies would be resolved with everyone moving to the same system as well as clarifying any questions of mutual aide. (Benton, 2005)

This is a brief summary of the benefits that the research realized. Recognizing there would be some upfront cost costs to convert other agencies to the Sheriff's Office software, the estimate was prepared and presented to the Board of County Commissioners for consideration and inclusion in the 2006/2007 budget. It was the consensus of the review group to recommend moving forward with the project. The project was time sensitive due to the pending budget process and looming budget crisis, particularly for the municipalities. The two cities that were not currently dispatched through the Sheriff's Office were transitioned in separate years. The second city was reluctant at first until they observed the efficiency of the system working and the potential for actual savings. That project has been completed and is fully operational and consolidated. (Benton, 2005) (Adopted Budgets, 2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2012/2013, Highlands County, Florida, Cities of Sebring and Avon Park, Florida)

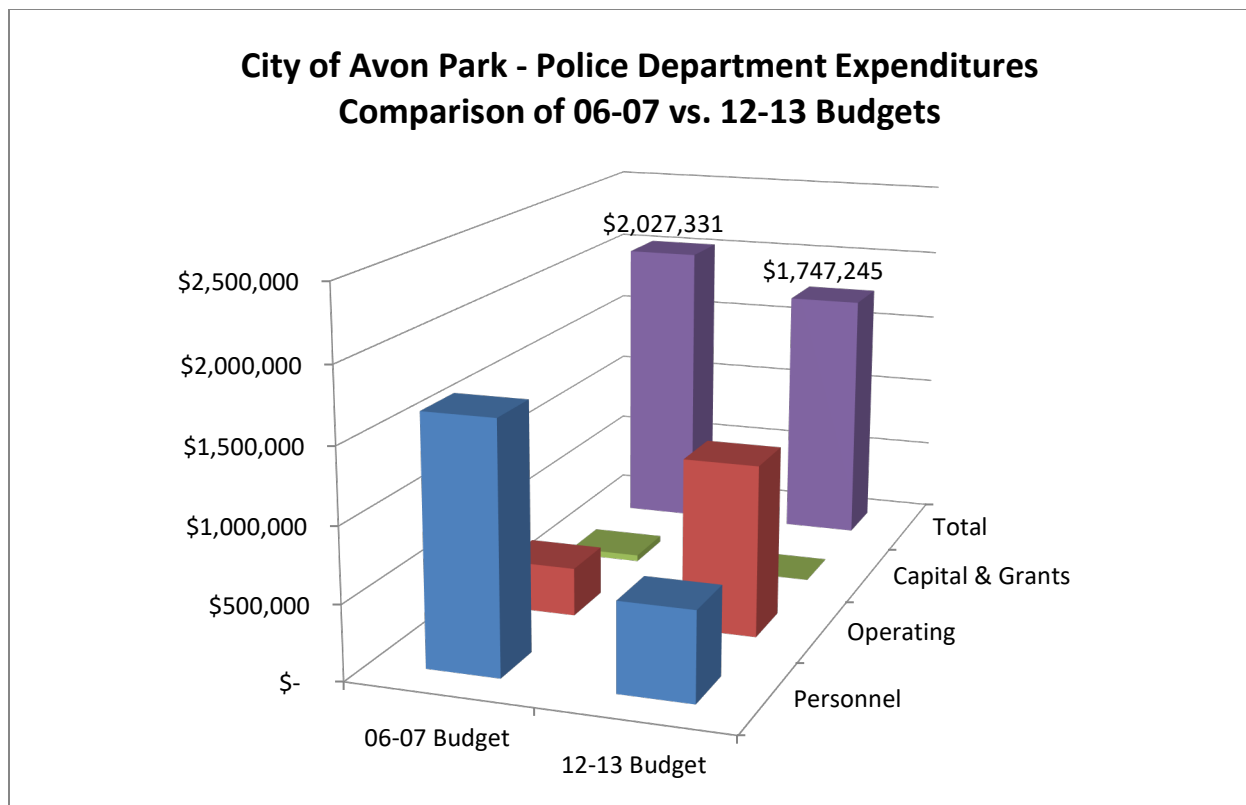
The actual savings to the cities to date are as follows:



(Adopted Budgets, 2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2012/2013, Highlands County, Florida, Cities of Sebring and Avon Park, Florida)

Law Enforcement Contractual Services

The next step in the area of combined services is a contractual relationship that the Sheriff's Office has with the Avon Park City Council to provide law enforcement services. This took place in October 2012, and the City has realized a significant reduction in their law enforcement budget and there has been no decrease in service provided. The News Sun reported on January 24, 2013 that "City and Sheriff mutually pleased with transition." (Tuffley, 2013) The question at hand now is how has our community adjusted to the transition and is it viewed as a positive move? This research survey instrument will focus on the above two subjects as the Sheriff's Office continues to discuss additional consolidation considerations with the County. Total cost savings to the cities is as follows:



(Adopted Budgets, 2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2012/2013, Highlands County, Florida, Cities of Sebring and Avon Park, Florida)

Methods

The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire distributed by U.S. mail. The instrument was structured for subjective experience for the respondents' beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and opinions. The questionnaire was meant to translate the research objectives into specific questions. Answers to the questions provided the data for research hypothesis testing. The questions were structured to motivate the respondent by involving subjective experience about the issue being researched. The questions were closed ended questions with a broad range so as not to force or influence bias. The majority were matrix questions, with a few yes or no and one numerical ranking question.

How Selected and deployed

Population sampling; There were a total of three (3) groups selected for this survey, they are as follows:

➤ Group 1:

There are approximately 61,253 voters in Highlands County, Florida. The first group was a form of systematic sampling with numbered elements in the total population. Beginning by selecting the 7th citizen on the voter registration list by alphabetical order and every 750th person from there forward, 83 citizens received the questionnaire by mail. The questionnaire contained a self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

➤ Group 2

The second group was from a list that the Sheriff's Office maintains from the three Chambers of Commerce members as well as citizens that have requested to receive the Sheriff's Office monthly newsletter. The survey was mailed via US mail to that group. There were 106 members on the list that received the questionnaire.

➤ Group 3:

The third group was the Highlands County Homeowners Associations which contained 72 members that the questionnaire was distributed via US mail as well. The three separate groups were chosen to provide a wide and diverse group of individuals that were engaged in the community.

A total of 261 surveys were mailed. The three lists were merged and cross referenced alphabetically by name to assure no duplication of surveys was sent.

How Collected

All of the questionnaires were sent by US mail with a stamped addressed envelope to be returned via U.S. mail. These sample groups provide wide access to geographically dispersed samples throughout the county.

A cover letter was prepared to explain the purpose of the survey and attempt to overcome any resistance or prejudice, and to encourage a high response rate.

How Analyzed

The analysis was rather simple due to the construction of the questionnaire containing only closed ended response. What will be important is the response rate to ensure that the respondents accurately represent the population originally defined.

Response Rate

The response rate for mail and/or e-mail surveys is often low; therefore, a response rate in the range of 20-40% will be considered a success. Both an overall response rate will be given, as well as an individual question response rate.

Strengths

- The survey was relatively low costs.
- Mail out surveys tends to produce a reduction in bias error that might result from the personal characteristics of interviewers in person.
- Greater anonymity for the respondent due to the sensitive nature of the subject.

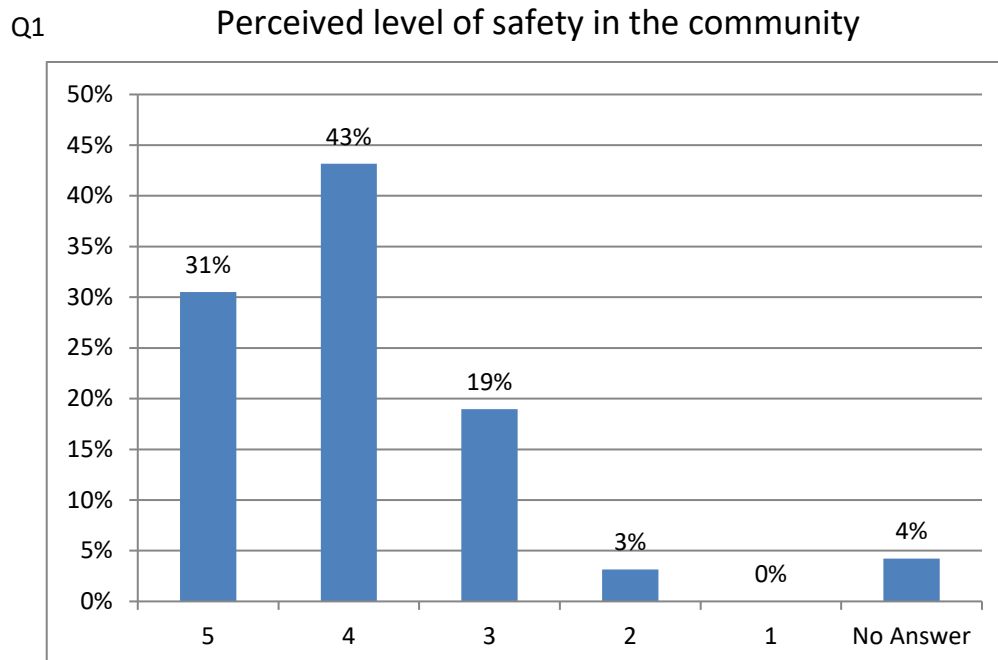
Weaknesses

- One question (number 8) was a ranking question where it was intended that the respondents would provide the ranking in relative order among the services listed. The question was structured to obtain information regarding the degree of importance or the priorities that the citizens would give to services provided. The numbers 1-7 were given which totaled the same number of services that were listed. There could have been instructions not to use the same number twice in order for force a single numeric value; however eighteen (18% or 17 respondents) responded to question number 8 giving services the same number rating thus skewing the results slightly and forcing a weighted method of calculation. All multiple rankings were given in the public safety area.
- Although the response rate was in the high end of the normal return range of 20-40%, others methods could have produced an increased response rate.

Results

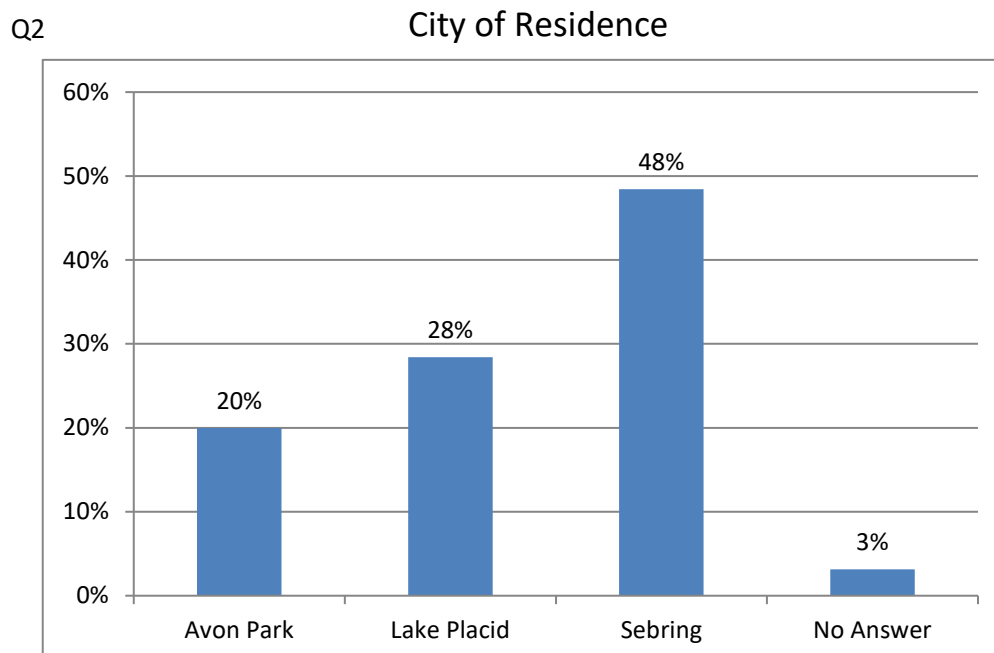
Of the 261 surveys, 95 responded by the deadline of July 5th. The rate of return was 36.4% which falls within higher level of the anticipated rate of success. As you can see from charts on the following pages the chart to Question number 1 demonstrates a confidence in our public safety leadership as the results were that 74% responded that they felt safe to very safe within their community. The respondents were geographically dispersed as shown on charts 2 and 3. Most surprisingly was the response to Question 6, asking if property taxes were in line with services; this shows a confidence in our county government and the services provided. As to Question number 7; 75% of citizens are in favor of consolidation of public safety services. Overall, the community as a whole has embraced the consolidation process both politically and financially. The partial consolidation has been smooth and uneventful. The process has proved to be cost effective and operational efficiency has been gained in the areas where consolidated. On the following pages are breakdowns of the questions and the responses to the survey.

Question 1 - Please rate what you believe to be your level of safety in our community?

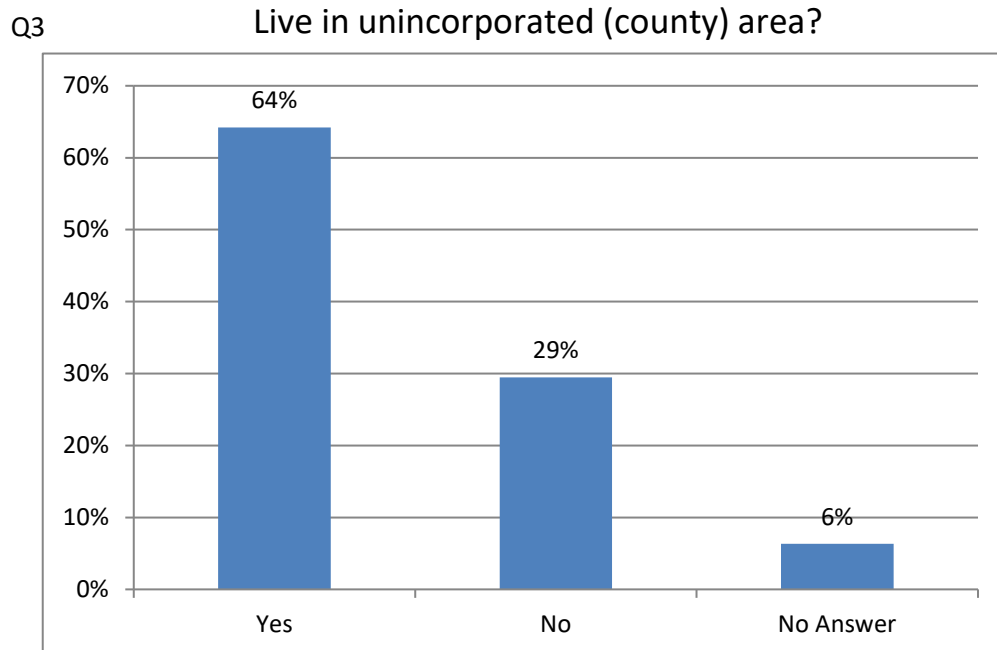


5= very safe 1= not safe at all

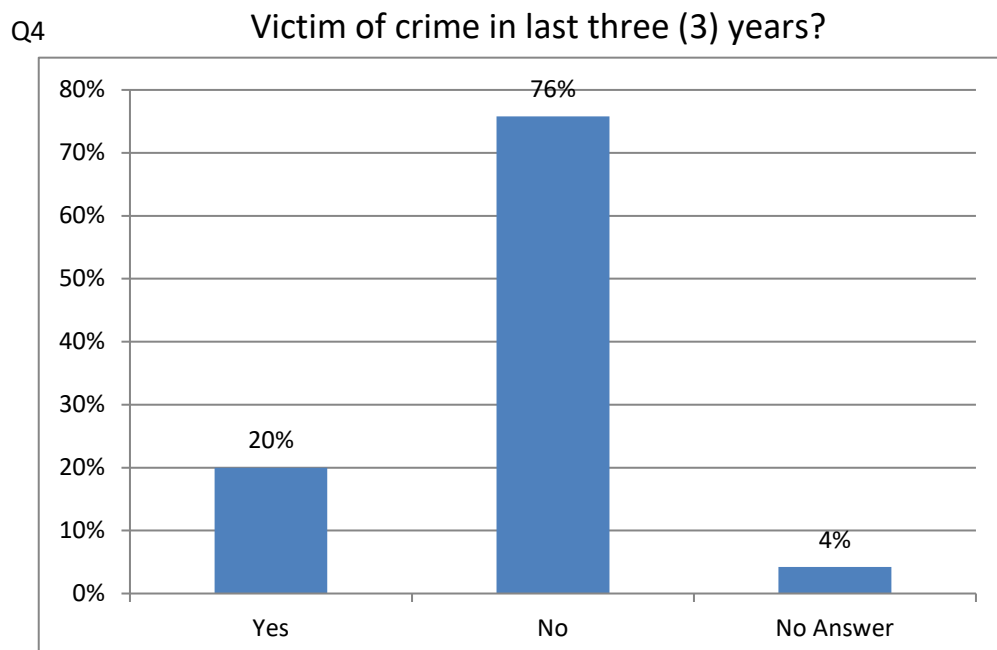
Question 2 - What is the City that you live in, or are closest to? Avon Park, Lake Placid, Sebring



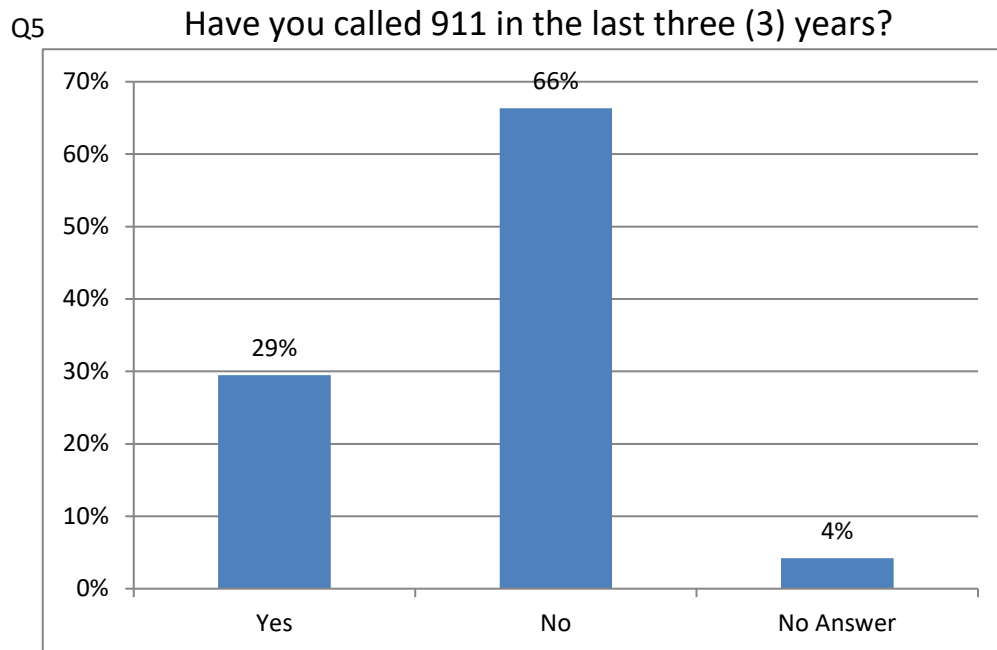
Question 3 - Do you live in the unincorporated (county) area?



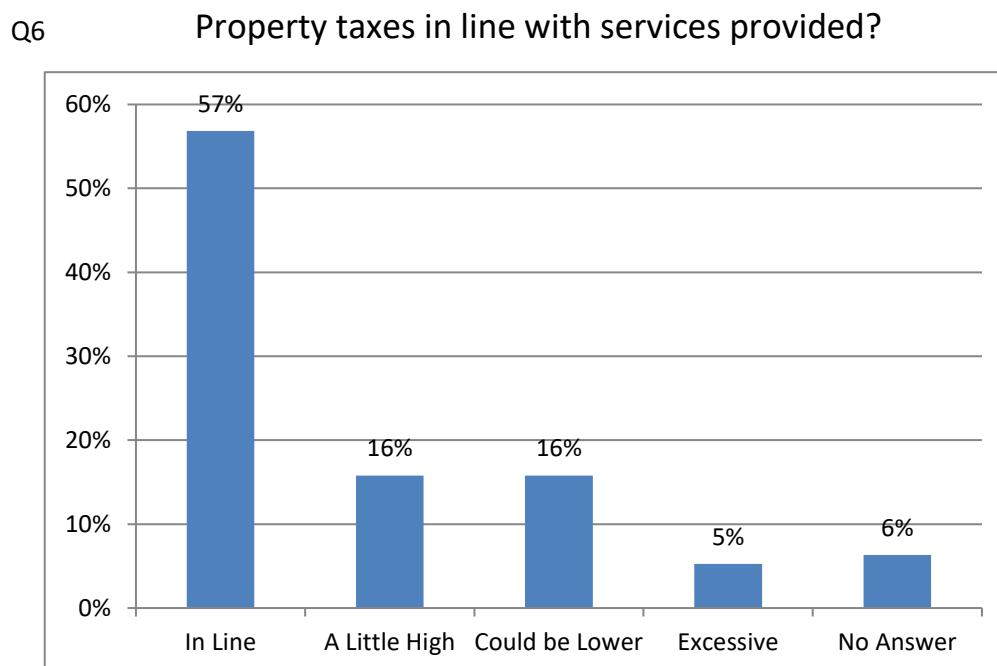
Question 4 - Have you been a victim of crime in the last three (3) years?



Question 5 – Have you been in a situation where you had to dial 911 in the last three years for any type of service?

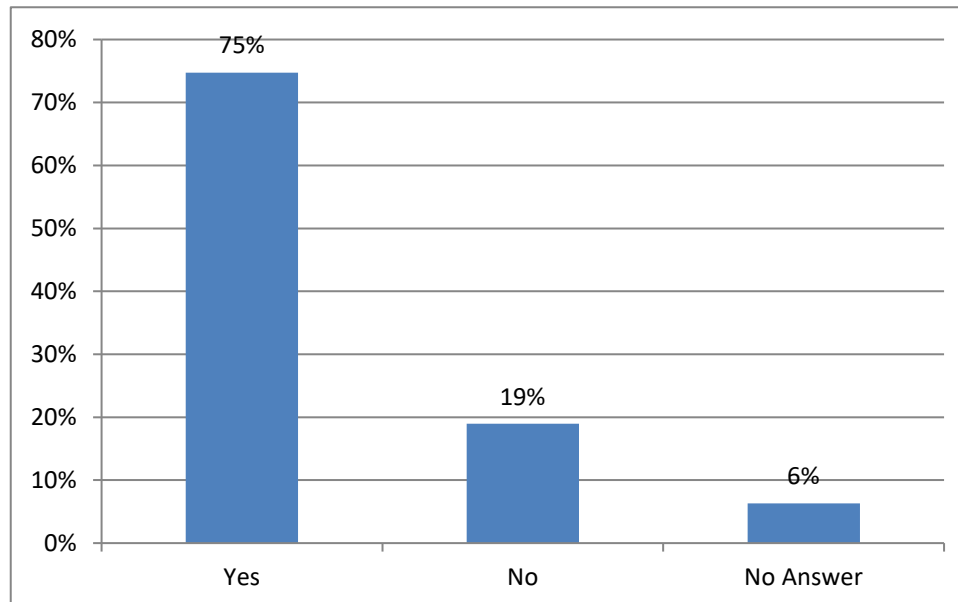


Question 6 - Do you believe your current property taxes paid are in line with the government services provided to you?



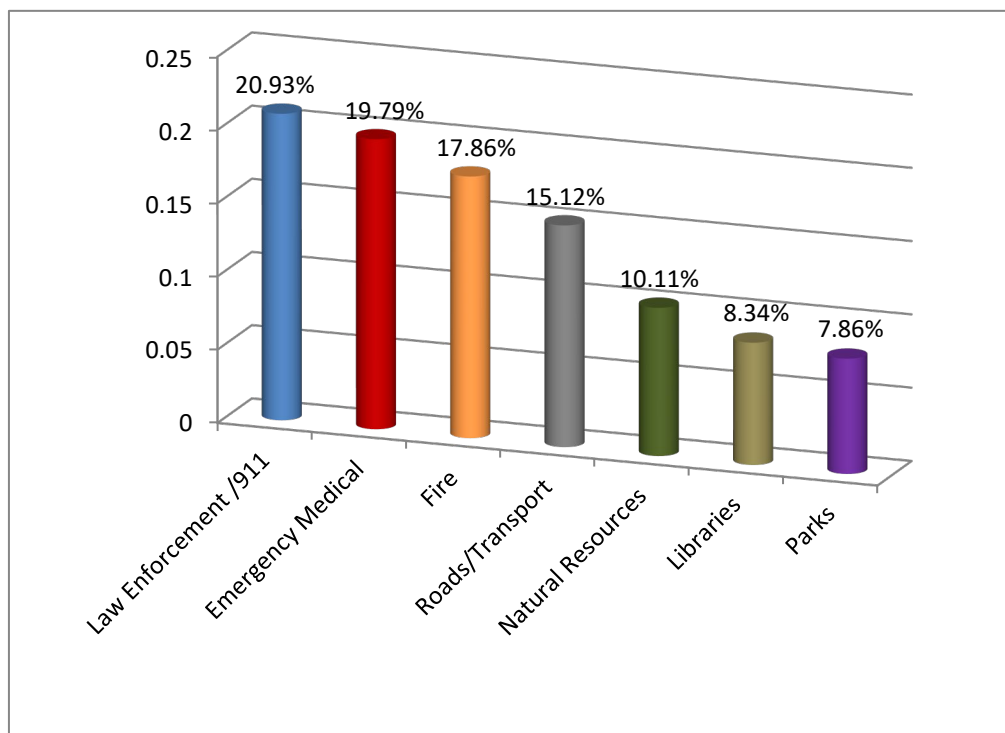
Question 7 - Would you be in favor of further consolidation of countywide public safety services if they were provided at a lower cost to the community with at least the same level of service?

Q7 Favor consolidation of public safety services?



Question 8 - Please rank locally provided services in order of importance; with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important to you.

Q8 Public Services ranked in order of importance



Note: Question 8, was a question asking the respondent to rate the services listed (1-7 with 1 being the most important) in order as selected by the respondent on a priori bases. Since 17 surveys came back using one of the numbers (1-7) more than once, (example, respondent rated Fire, EMS, and Law Enforcement all as 1, the score was inverted according to the number assigned for each service and totaled in order attain their total score. This was calculated this way in order to rank them numerically with some form of meaningful comparisons by assigning the numerical weight of each response to the service and to equally distribute the values. All numbers were inverted; i.e., rank 1 became a score of 7, rank 2 became a score of 6, etc. An attitude index was created from the scores to obtain scores which stand as indicators of the attitudes of the respondent's importance and priorities for service. On Appendix C, a simple Likert Scale was used to show each service as ranked using the relative number submitted by the respondent 1-7.

Discussion

Consolidation of public safety services discussion began in Highlands County in 2005 when dwindling funds created the potential for reduced services and coverage. In early 2006, two of the three city police agencies and the County's Emergency Medical Service, Fire, and Emergency Management Operations were operating their own dispatch E-911 centers. All agencies were providing duplication in the areas of services, cost of personnel, equipment, training, and technology. As the need for advanced technology upgrades and the growing necessity for shared data systems and software between the agencies became paramount to officer safety, an existing group of public safety staff including the Sheriff and all three City Police Chiefs met and researched and reviewed issues and benefits of consolidating E-911 dispatch. The group reached a unanimous decision that consolidation was in the best interest of all agencies, the public, and the county and city coffers and would provide efficiencies and an increased level of service. With one small town already consolidated with the Sheriff's Office Communication Division, the second police agency and all county ambulance and fire came on board in 2006, with the last remaining police agency coming on board in 2007 for a complete countywide consolidation of E-911 dispatch. During this time system upgrades occurred and the consolidation saved the cities and county EMS, Fire, and Emergency Operations Center saved hundreds of thousands of dollars collectively by riding the Sheriff's contract for software and equipment as one agency rather than independently. These costs are not included in the savings documented on the graphs on page 11 and 12 which only includes general personnel and operating costs. The total additional savings for the upgrade was over \$384,000 per year to the cities. The savings for the consolidation of police services for the City of Avon Park for personnel and operating cost is more than \$280,000. With the legislative changes and labor union issues, the cost to the city would have been much greater than the budget year that those changes took place. Additionally, the Sheriff's Office just upgraded their 800 Megahertz radio system and due to the police consolidation, there was no cost to the City, thus saving nearly one hundred thousand dollars since the law enforcement services fell under the Sheriff.

There is a tremendous savings in support services, specialized unit response, special enforcement units, crime scene forensics, specialized equipment and upgrades to technology, since most of those services were redundant and in smaller agencies are often under-utilized.

Obviously, it depends on the community and their preconceptions about the value and savings of blending agencies. There is no one size fits all in consolidation and the public's acceptance or rejection of the notion can make or break the success of the merge. The biggest hindrance in city police consolidation and/or county emergency operations are the fear of loss of control particularly in smaller communities.

Recommendations

- Create a task force to review all related services and their accompanying budget to determine what, if any services contain duplication of efforts and/or inefficiencies that will benefit from consolidation.
- Evaluate the services that if combined, would increase comprehensive community safety and homeland security.
- Look for areas and opportunities to enhance communication between police, fire, and emergency operations.
- Consider areas that would benefit from a unified command structure.

Lisa Burley has been in county government for over 22 years with the last 8 years working within the Highlands County Sheriff's Office. During her term with the Sheriff's Office, she has served as Research Director, Chief of Staff, and currently as Business Administrator over the Business Services Division. Lisa has a Bachelor's of Arts in Organizational Management from Warner Southern College; a Masters of Public Administration from Troy State University and a Designation of Certification in Public Management from Florida State University.

References

- Adopted Budget Documents. (2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2012/2013). *Highlands County, Board of County Commissioners, Florida, City of Sebring, Florida, City of Avon Park, Florida.*
- Benton, S. (2005, July 6). Public safety staff consensus memo for county-wide consolidated communications. Highlands County Board of County Commissioners.
- National Fire Protection Agency. 2011a. The US fire problem. Quincy, MA: National Fire Protection Agency. www.nfpa.org/itemDetail.asp?categoryID=953&itemID=23033&URL=Research/Fire%20statistics/The%20U.S.%20fire%20problem&cookie%5Ftest=1.
- National Fire Protection Agency. 2011b. The US fire service: Fire fighters and fire departments. Quincy, MA: National Fire Protection Agency. www.nfpa.org/itemDetail.asp?categoryID=955&itemID=23688&URL=Research/Fire%20statistics/The%20U.S.%20fire%20service.
- National Fire Protection Agency. 2011c. The United States Fire Service. Quincy, MA: National Fire Protection Agency. www.nfpa.org/assets/files/PDF/Research/FireServiceFactSheet.pdf.
- NJSACOP. New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police, (2007). *Police department regionalization, consolidation, merger & shared services, important considerations for policy makers*. Retrieved from A NJSACOP White Paper website: <http://www.njslom.org/documents/whitepaper.pdf>
- Sotebeer, M. S. (2013, Jan/Feb). Police partnerships: The sheriff's future? One city's road to better law enforcement. *National Sheriff Association Sheriff*, 65(1), 13-15.
- Stelter, L. (2013, January). The growing need for independent research and analysis to aid chiefs in evaluating public safety consolidation models. *The Police Chief*, 30-33. Retrieved from http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article_id=2845&issue_id=12013
- Tuffley, C. (2013, January 23). City and sheriff mutually pleased with transition. *The News Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.newssun.com/PrinterFriendly/012313-ct-Sheriff-AP>
- Wison, J. M., & Grammich, C. (2012). *BOLO 1, Police consolidation, regionalization, and shared services: options, and lessons, from research and practice*. Informally published manuscript, Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services, Michigan State University, Available from PCASS Publications. BOLO 1- 2012)

Wison, J. M., & Grammich, C. (2012). *BOLO 2, Public Safety Consolidation: What is it? How does it work?* Informally published manuscript, Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services, Michigan State University, Available from PCASS Publications. BOLO 2-2012)

Appendix A – Letter that accompanied the Survey

Hello:

My name is Lisa Burley and I have worked in county government for 21 years. I am currently enrolled in a career development program titled Senior Leadership Program Class 16 offered by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. A requirement of this program is to complete a research paper concerning an immediate or future law enforcement or community issue. One of the components of the research requires a public survey.

Municipalities and counties across the nation have long debated the issue whether public safety services can be consolidated in certain areas, while maintaining an adequate level of service, at a lower cost to the community. Over the last several years Highlands County completely consolidated E-911 dispatch for all of law enforcement (city and county) fire and emergency medical services, significantly reducing costs and improving response time. This past year, the Sheriff's Office contracted with the City of Avon Park to provide primary Law Enforcement Services for the City thus reducing their law enforcement budget significantly.

Attached is a questionnaire meant to survey the community on their opinion on the operational effects of the consolidations of the E-911 and the Avon Park Police Law Enforcement contractual service. This is an attempt to survey the comfort with current service level, and if the public would like to see additional merging of services where feasible. This survey is completely independent of any government agency and meant only for the purpose of completing my research project. I would ask that you please complete the survey and return in the enclosed, stamped envelope. The results will be published on the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Website under the Senior Leadership Program Class 16 papers. Your participation is completely anonymous.

Thank you for taking the time to participate.

Lisa Burley

Appendix B

Public Safety Consolidation **Community Survey**

1. Please rate what you believe to be your level of safety in our community?

5 4 3 2 1 (5 = very safe- 1= not safe at all)

2. What is the City that you live in, or are closest to?

Avon Park Lake Placid Sebring

3. Do you live in the unincorporated (county) area?

Yes No

4. Have you been a victim of crime in the last three (3) years?

Yes No

5. Have you been in a situation where you had to dial 911 in the last three years for any type of service?

Yes No

6. Do you believe your current property taxes paid are in line with the government services provided to you?

In Line A little high Could be lower Excessive

7. Would you be in favor of further consolidation of countywide public safety services if they were provided at a lower cost to the community with at least the same level of service?

Yes No

8. Please rank locally provided services in order of importance; with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important to you.

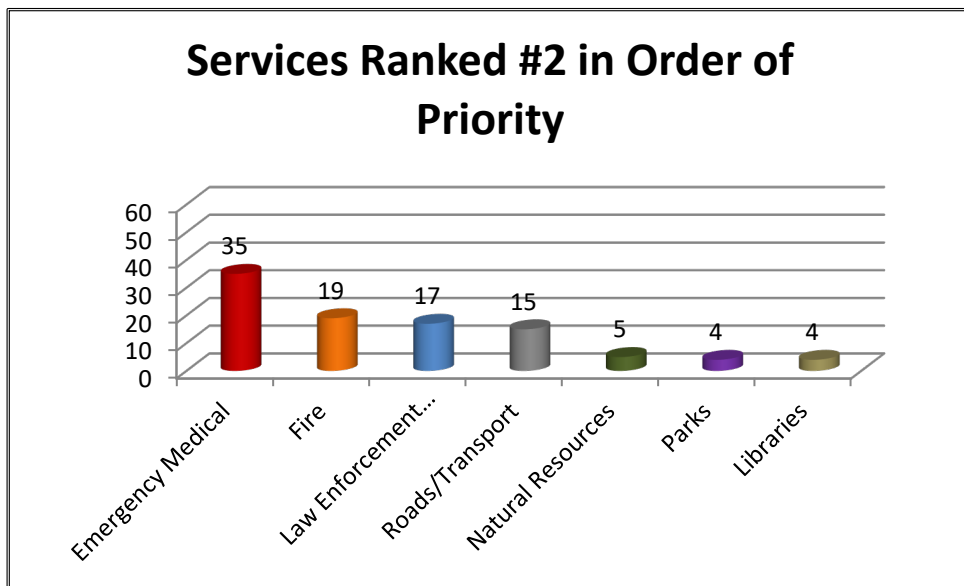
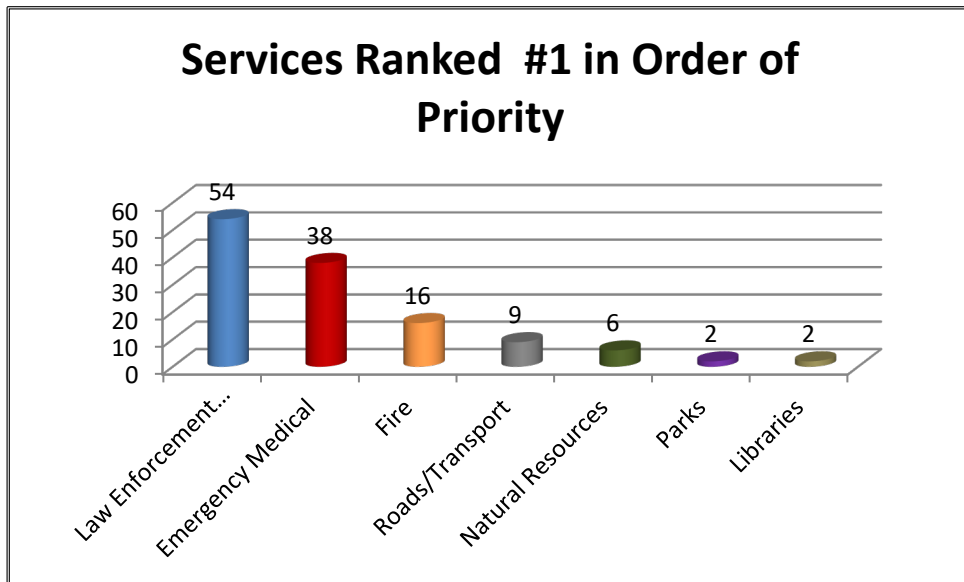
Natural Resources _____ Fire _____ Emergency Medical _____

Roads/Transportation _____ Law Enforcement/E911 _____ Parks _____

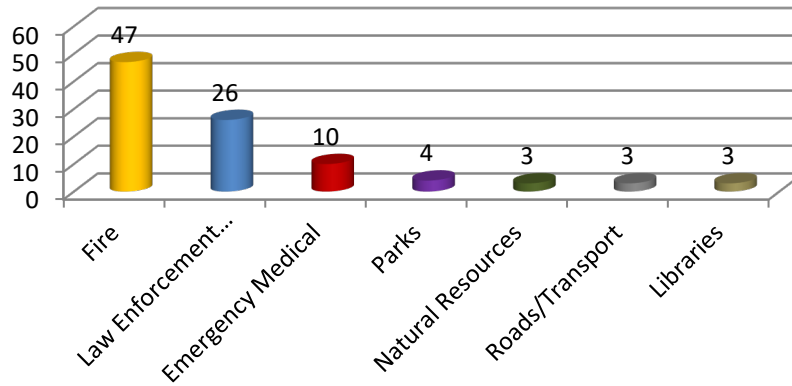
Libraries _____

Appendix C – Question 8 - Please rank locally provided services in order of importance; with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important to you.

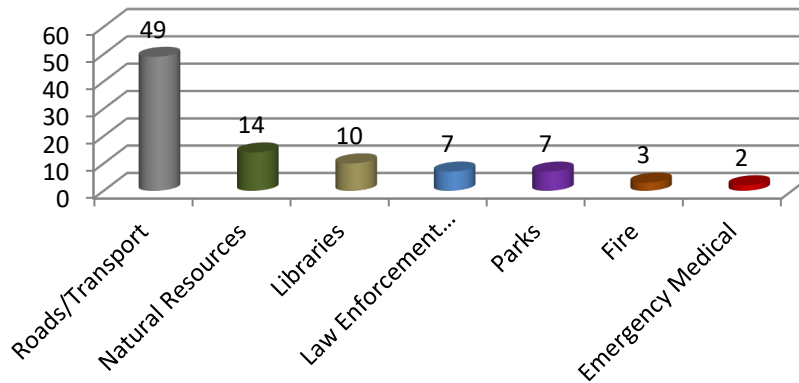
Likert Scale using the number the respondent used for ranking in order of importance with no totaling or weighting.



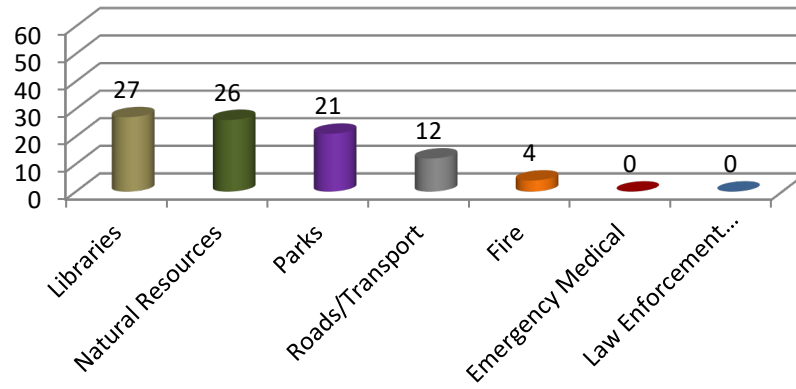
Services Ranked #3 in Order of Priority



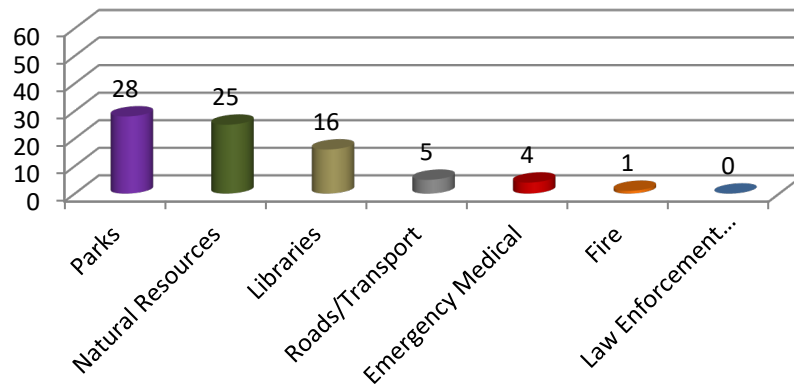
Services Ranked #4 in Order of Priority



Services Ranked #5 in Order of Priority



Services Ranked #6 in Order of Priority



Services Ranked #7 in Order of Priority

