Laconia, Belmont will share fire department duties

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LACONIA — While the details are being worked out, the city of Laconia and town of Belmont have come to an inter-municipal agreement, where they will have Fire Chief Kenneth Erickson leading the Belmont Fire Department along with his current duties as the city’s chief.

The two communities will share fire administration duties, which means that Erickson and Laconia Assistant Fire Chief Kirk Beattie will be first and second in command, respectively.

City Manager Scott Myers and Belmont Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin both feel that the agreement is one that should benefit the towns greatly in a number of ways, including improving response times.

“I think it is a very positive step for multiple reasons,” said Myers. “The geography of Belmont being close to Laconia is one. There are probably some areas of Belmont we can respond to even quicker than they can because of the location of the stations.”

Beaudin said the benefit they are hoping to see is enhanced service. She said one of the discussion points about this was to think about the agreement as more than just a cost saving measure.

“We were thinking about how this can benefit the citizens of Belmont, along with what benefit it brings to the city of Laconia,” said Beaudin. “We see this as an improved ability for service, and we think it will be successful.”

Myers explained that there is a Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid agreement in place for response to structure fires. Both communities are already responding to each other’s incidents regularly, and they have a shared dispatch.

“There is a lot of framework collectively in how we operate that is in place already,” said Myers.
Beaudin added that there are communities that share fire duties like Tilton/Northfield, but they are a fire district, which is different than what has been agreed upon here. This, she said, is a shared administration. She said the details about the number of hours being in Laconia and Belmont have yet to be finalized.

Beaudin said discussions about sharing the administration for the fire departments began less than a month ago. Initially, the meetings were between Beaudin, Myers, the Belmont Board of Selectmen and Mayor Ed Engler. Once it started to look like it could become a reality, they involved Erickson in the conversation.

Myers said with former Belmont Fire Chief David Parenti recently leaving the department to take a job in Massachusetts, this seemed like the perfect time to start the conversation of sharing administrative services for the chief and assistant chief.

“This seemed like a step that makes sense,” said Myers. “Hopefully, this will lead to additional conversations about purchase of apparatus and other things.”

Both chiefs will continue to be city of Laconia employees, where they will receive city benefits. Myers said they will have an increased workload, so he will be making a request to the city council that they have their pay grade adjusted as well.

“At the end of the day, there will be a cost savings of both Laconia and Belmont in sharing this,” said Myers.

Myers said they will be putting together an allocation formula with Belmont, based on things like the number of emergency calls between the two communities, number of residential units, assessed values and others. This will help them allocate the percentage of the overall costs for both chiefs, and Belmont will pay a percentage based on their expected share of the workload.

Myers said recently, Gilford, Belmont and Laconia came together to share an animal control officer. With this, they put together a three-way inter-municipal agreement, because the communities lost that service through budget challenges. He said this document will be similar.

The communities are currently actively working on formalizing a final agreement, which is expected to be completed shortly. Beaudin said the idea is that it will be a year contract with an option to renew.

“We are hoping for the success for the shared arrangement, and then we can look at furthering that agreement and extending it beyond one year,” said Beaudin.