



*“Building” the
Building Committee
Who Should be
Tapped*



Stewart · Cooper · Newell
Architects

“Building” the Building Committee: Who Should be Tapped?

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Nearly three thousand years ago, Solomon penned, “In the multitude of counsellors there is safety”. But many years later, someone else wrote, “A camel is a race horse designed by committee.” For those planning a fire or rescue station project, the reality lies somewhere between these two opinions.

For many valid reasons, significant station projects are not planned and executed by only one individual. There is much planning and many decisions to be made in the process, including; project pre-planning, designer selection, design phase decisions, and construction phase decisions. Each project phase benefits by having more than one decision maker involved. Solomon’s statement contains great truth, combining the wisdom of several qualified participants will more likely lead to a successful outcome.

So, one of the first projects tasks will be “building” the building committee. This leads to the critical questions; how big should the committee be and who should it include? The answers to these questions are obviously impacted by the classification of the Department and who has controlling authority. For instance, the players in the small, rural Volunteer Fire Department will be quite different than those for a large, municipally-owned, Career Department.

How Big Should the Committee Be?

If the committee is too small, there can easily be conflicts of opinions that allow individual personalities to become dominant. In such instances, the less dominant personalities will simply back away from the decision process, thus resulting in a single decision maker, or equally dominant personalities will constantly reach an impasse. Also, a very small group meeting can easily be ineffective if one or two members miss the meeting.

On the other hand, when the committee is too big, all of their necessary activities can be prolonged into extended time frames. By the time everyone offers their input on the meeting’s first subject, it’s time to adjourn! Large committees make it challenging to schedule meetings, reach consensus, and satisfy necessary project goals.

In over four decades of working with Fire & Rescue Departments, our firm has found that building committees of three to six persons tend to perform most efficiently. If the Department’s size, community input, or participation of other non-fire, municipal departments require many more participants, you may want to consider having two committees; the smaller building committee and a larger advisory committee that the building committee reports back to at regular intervals.

Who Should be on the Committee?

Again, depending on the necessary number of participants, the group may be broken into a building committee and an advisory committee. Let's consider some of the most important committee members, along with the more common project participants.

Members of the Fire & Rescue Department should be on the committee. That may seem obvious, but you may be surprised at the number of municipalities that go through the entire process, from designer selection through station construction, with no Fire Department representatives on the committee. In this scenario the Fire Department is "given the keys" to a station that they have had little to no input. This is a recipe for disaster that your Department will never want to experience.

First, we consider a minimum of three specific Department personnel as a must on the committee. The Department Chief, or their representative having authority, should be a committee participant. They ultimately are responsible for the decisions made, and often have the most experience.

Second, a firefighter who will be stationed at the facility should also be a committee member. They will be living with and in the results of all decisions made, so they have a vested interest in the process. When other end users want to know (or complain about) why a particular process or detail was selected, this committee member has the insight to answer.

Third, a young officer who is expected to be in the Department for many years, should also be a committee member. Why? Too often the Chief is the only Department representative in the process, from beginning to end. The Chief is often no more than two to ten years from retirement. The young Department representative who is at the table for the current project will be very valuable for the future Department project. Even if this person has no decision authority on the current project, they will have an understanding of how the entire process works and why the previous decisions were made.

One of the Fire Department committee members should also act as the Department's point of contact for the Architect. Having one point of contact for both the Department and the design team means that all information flows through only two persons and results in less miscommunications.

If the Department is municipally owned, an administrative representative from the governmental unit will likely need to be part of the committee to assure that municipal budget and scheduling goals are being met. This protects both the Fire Department and the City or County. Decisions made by the Department without administrative approval can lead to strained relationships, project delays, or even project cancelation.

Every Fire & Rescue Department has a governing board that ultimately determines how they can spend money. Whether you answer to a city council, a county commission, a 501c board, or some other group, we have found that it can be beneficial to have one of these board members on

the building committee. They can serve as a liaison and voice of support for the Department. Since they were part of the process and took part in the decision making, this member can be your ally in justifying the projected size, details, and costs of the facility.

If a municipality will be responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the finished project, it is often advisable to include one of their facilities maintenance or public works personnel on the committee. They will offer input on the materials and systems that they prefer, since they will become responsible for those items at the end of the project warranty period. Because of their experience, this person may also be able to offer input on the designer selection, the general contractor, and sub-contractors.

Keep in mind, if firefighters in your Department are unionized, a union representative may be a requirement for your building committee.

Some Fire & Rescue Departments, particularly those where the station will be located in or adjacent to residential or organized communities, will want to have good lines of communications with those communities. Home Owner Associations (HOAs), downtown district organizations, and others are often groups that will play a role in the success of your project. Including a member from the applicable organization on your building committee may prove beneficial. At the very least, scheduling community meetings with these groups in order to update them on the project and to solicit their support and input is important.

Do your best to tag the right individuals for the building committee from the beginning. Then try to get the most benefit out of each committee member. The planning, designing, and construction of a station project can be a complicated, yet fulfilling endeavor. Be sure to select a design firm with lots of successful station experience to assist your building committee make your project a resounding success.