

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

## *Somerville Emergency Services Complex*

In December of 2002, the Borough of Somerville commissioned SSP Architectural Group to perform a detailed Needs Assessment and Existing Facilities Analysis of the Borough's current emergency services facilities, and, based upon the findings of these studies, to create a Conceptual Facility Design and Master Plan for a new *Emergency Services Complex*. This report contains the findings of the team's assessments and analyses, as well as recommendations and suggestions to improve and upgrade the Borough's emergency services readiness and capabilities while continuing to encourage Somerville's 160 plus - year tradition of volunteerism.

The Master Plan itself offers a set of guidelines for a new Emergency Services Complex. As imagined, this Complex will efficiently and adequately meet the facility requirements of today's emergency service providers, whether police officers, fire fighters, or rescue squad personnel. In addition, the facility will be designed to accommodate the needs of future emergency services providers for decades to come.

The SSP team considered several complimentary and contentious issues in creating the two Master Plan options. First and foremost, due to major demographic changes in Somerville, the advent of new technologies and equipment, and the luck of geography, the Borough's emergency services personnel are currently struggling to perform at their best due to inadequate and inefficient facilities. Another factor is, as always, cost. The SSP team suggests a variety of design ideas to help reduce the Borough's expenditures in developing the new Emergency Services Complex, ranging from making existing buildings tax-ratable to retaining the Fire Department's and Rescue Squad's volunteer status. Implicit in this last goal is the desire to create a new facility that both honors and maintains the efforts of volunteers in Somerville's emergency services.

The emergency facilities studied by SSP were the Somerville Police Department, the Hook and Ladder Company No. 1, the West End Hose Company No. 3, Engine Company No. 1, the Lincoln Hose Company No. 4, and the First Aid and Rescue Squad. During the facility assessment phase, the team interviewed police, fire fighter, and rescue personnel to identify and prioritize those space needs essential to the delivery of public safety services. Key to this process was the involvement of The Smith Group, a firm nationally recognized as experts in the design of public

safety facilities. Overall, the facilities assessment and programming interviews concluded that the Borough's Emergency Services Buildings are inadequate. Specialized law enforcement spaces and areas capable of storing and maintaining modern fire fighting apparatus and rescue vehicles are either deficient or absent, and even at those facilities adequate to equipment needs, site accessibility issues were present to some degree. The most common problem was a lack of adequate space to house modern fire fighting and rescue apparatus and vehicles—the same issue that the Borough has previously addressed many times over by housing emergency services in new, larger buildings. Specific findings from each of the facilities studied are summarized below:

*Police Department:* The Borough police department currently operates out of a building designed as a beer distribution warehouse and built in the 1950s. Last renovated to house the police department in 1978, the facility has no conference room, no sally port for police vehicles, and no interview rooms. Several spaces common to modern police facilities are also absent. These include an area for fingerprinting and a dedicated filing and records area. In addition, the building is in gross violation of several building codes. Finally, the Borough police department has no municipal court space of its own, and must rent court space from Raritan.

*Hook and Ladder Company No. 1:* Originally designed to accommodate a new “Wonder” fire-fighting truck in 1896, the history of Somerville's Hook and Ladder Company is a predictable pattern of expansion and renovation of the building as the Borough purchased new fire fighting vehicles necessary to keep residents protected but too large to store. The Company is currently scheduled to receive a new truck in 2004, yet still operates out of building from 1901. Unfortunately, because of lack of space, the Company will be forced to purchase a truck that fits the building, rather than the most appropriate truck for the Borough's fire fighting needs. Another issue with the Company's site is the lack of access. In fact, during holidays and parades, the main response route for the Company is closed off entirely. And, as in the Police Department building, the facility is in violation of several building codes, and cannot be upgraded to accommodate any of the heavy equipment or new technologies necessary for modern emergency response.

*West End Hose Company No. 3:* Housed in a borough-owned building dedicated in 1971, the West End Hose Company's facilities are adequate to the Company's fire fighting needs. Opportunities for small, relatively low-cost improvements are present, however. These include ADA and HVAC upgrades.

*Engine Company No. 1:* The facilities of Engine Company No. 1 meet the Company's current needs in all respects except for size, and the building requires only small upgrades to address building operating systems deficiencies. However, on a more long-term basis, the building has inadequate operating space for fire fighting apparatus maintenance, inadequate bay dimensions for modern fire fighting equipment, and sits well within the flood plain. In this building the last truck purchased was customized to fit.

*Lincoln Hose Company No. 4:* Located in a building built in 1974 when the company's existing facilities proved too small to house a new fire truck, the Company's building is capable of supporting modern fire fighting apparatus. The site could be improved through the purchase of adjacent property, allowing for such measures as the addition of a second unit, second floor assembly purposes, improved accessibility, and/or emergency disaster housing.

*First Aid and Rescue Squad:* Unlike the Borough's other Emergency Response Services, the Borough's First Aide and Rescue Squad is an independent, non-profit operation. Despite an ever-increasing number of calls to the station (1,400 calls were made in 2002), the volunteers of the organization have proven up to the task of responding to residents' first aid needs while neighboring towns have had to contract with private providers of first aid and rescue services. Unfortunately, the Squad's building and site have reached their capacity in terms of the equipment they can hold, forcing the Squad to house some of its vehicles and equipment outdoors. Also, as in the fire fighting stations, the Squad had to purchase custom ambulances that were smaller than desired.

Compared to the Police Department, some of the Fire Department and Rescue Squad facilities already possess adequate space for internal station functions. However, all of the facilities suffer from an inability to keep pace with modern public safety equipment and vehicle space requirements. Even in those buildings currently capable of supporting emergency services, lack of space and bay size limits will likely reduce fire fighting and first aid responsiveness within a few years. In the past, these limitations have forced the Borough to forgo appropriate apparatus upgrades in favor of costly custom-built or undersized equipment, designed to fit in the available space. Inadequacies in bay length, drive-through access, gear storage, and proper handling of hoses and extinguishers all contribute to the facilities' overall inefficiency.

In addition to the Emergency Services buildings' inability to house modern equipment, most face accessibility problems as well. For example, the lack of a secondary road leading to Warren St. makes the Lincoln Hose Company's site difficult to exit. Similar shortcomings are present at Central Hook & Ladder and Engine Company No. 1. Allowing all four Fire Department facilities, a site, or sites, appropriate to the turning radii of specialized equipment and centrally located within the township, would drastically improve community safety.

In addition to building and site issues, the bisection of Somerville by Peter's Brook poses a challenge to the delivery of emergency services. While services can be reasonably provided during a flood emergency, flood damage to some of the facilities themselves can pose a significant threat to service delivery. Our conceptual designs mitigate the effects of being located in the flood plain.

Based upon this analysis, the Borough has an opportunity to break the cycle of choosing between expensive built-to-order equipment and stop-gap new emergency services buildings by constructing a new, centralized *Emergency Services Complex*. The SSP team has developed a basic building "footprint" for the Complex. This footprint was used as a tool to evaluate existing available real estate and to determine the feasibility of the available sites for development. The team then created two possible options for the new Complex. Both call for a combination of new construction and expansions and renovations to existing facilities, and both provide the basis for facilities that will contribute to improved public safety for the foreseeable future. The Options are summarized below:

***Option A – Veterans' Memorial Drive***

The creation of a new Emergency Services Complex on the Veteran's Memorial Drive site coupled with an expansion of the West End Hose Company No. 3, offers several improvements over the Borough's current Emergency Services facilities, as well as opportunities for the Borough to make their facilities more cost-efficient. Specifics of this Plan are:

- A new Public Safety Building, housing the Police Department, Violations Department, and Municipal Court.
- A new Fire Department Building, housing Lincoln Hose Company No. 4, Engine Company No. 1, and the Rescue Squad and maintenance operations.

- Expansion of the West End Hose Company to house the Central Hook and Ladder Company.

***Option B – Williams Street***

Option B, like the Veteran’s Memorial Drive Plan, calls for the creation of a new Emergency Services Complex, but located on Williams Street, coupled with an expansion of the West End Hose Company No. 3 and a new Public Safety building located on Lot 7 (High St.) . This plan improves the Borough’s current Emergency Services facilities’ capabilities and capacity, on high-visibility sites with excellent access to both primary and secondary Somerville streets. Specifics of this Plan are:

- A new Public Safety Building, housing the Police Department, Violations Department, and Municipal Court.
- A new Fire Department Building, housing Lincoln Hose Company No. 4, Engine Company No. 1, and the Rescue Squad and maintenance operations.
- Expansion of the West End Hose Co. to house the Central Hook and Ladder Co.