

11/16/17

Since the most recent financial audit was released detailing large deficits in certain city funds the Mayor, Common Council, and Controller have been put in the unenviable position of having to solve a major problem that is no fault of their own. While leaders at City Hall seem to be optimistic and determined to solve the problem there has been a disturbing development that has emerged in the wake of this crisis that is not in the best interest of city residents: A reduction in fire protection.

As of Monday, November 6th, the fire department has been directed to not call in people to fill vacancies when daily staffing falls below our minimum staffing requirement of six firefighters on duty. This staffing requirement has been supported by at least the past two Fire Chiefs. The minimum number of six firefighters on duty at all times is based on an Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) standard. The standard says if two firefighters enter a burning building or other environment that is an immediate danger to life and health there must be two additional firefighters outside that are capable of rescuing them if necessary. OSHA also specifies that the “designated outside person(s) cannot be assigned tasks that are critical to the safety and health of any other employee working at the incident (OSHA 1910.134(g)(4)).” The pump operator and incident commander at any structure fire are critical tasks that cannot be abandoned. A pump operator, an incident commander, two firefighters inside fighting a fire, and two more outside carrying out a number of different tasks while at the same time at the ready to make a rescue gets us to a minimum of six people on duty.

Since November 6th the fire department has dropped below six men on duty on five occasions. This not only jeopardizes the safety of firefighters but also puts the citizens at risk. If staffing falls below six people a unit will have to come out of service. This reduces our capability of answering multiple alarms at once (which happens around 30% of the time) and increases the likelihood that calls will be missed or delayed. If a unit gets taken out of service it will likely be the ladder truck which is used to access fires and make rescues at higher elevations like apartment buildings and high-rises. If this happens, fire suppression or rescue efforts in these cases will likely be delayed.

Another consideration is the ambulance service run by the fire department since late summer. We said we could run the ambulance and provide fire protection the way we were staffed at the time without additional personnel and we meant it. Doing both with fewer people on duty is another matter. Any serious medical call requires the ambulance and an additional unit to respond so the patient can be properly cared for. In this situation there would be nobody left at the station to respond to any kind of emergency when staffing is reduced. Staffing at the OSHA level has rarely, if ever, left us in a position to miss a call excluding major incidents where mutual aid is called in. Reduction in daily staffing is guaranteed to change that.

By eliminating the staffing requirement the city is clearly looking to save on overtime. It is important for city officials to be aware that the main contributing reason behind staffing shortages is the fact that there are 20% fewer firefighters employed by the city than when the OSHA standard came out. Since then we have had the size of the department reduced while at the same time our call volume tripled and our responsibilities have expanded. At one time there were enough people per shift to absorb things like a job related injury, retirement, illness or hiring freeze and overtime was almost unheard of. As the department has become smaller simple

math indicates that shift shortages have become more likely. I'm sure detractors of the fire department will try and spin this letter as a "money grab" for overtime. We would be happy if the city were able to return our department to prior staffing levels, make our job safer, make the city safer, and never have to pay us overtime.

It is also concerning that, besides the elimination of some unpopular transit routes, the fire department seems to have been singled out to reduce expenses. To the best of my knowledge all other departments are carrying on business as usual. It is also important to note that the fire department is the only department in the city that brought in new revenue to offset their budget by 14% for this fiscal year (numbers taken from 17/18 adopted city budget). City officials are of course free to spend that revenue any way they want but it should not be lost on them that the fire department still needs to be staffed.

This letter is not meant to be adversarial and I hope no one at City Hall takes it that way. The city is in a tough situation and the way forward must be carefully mapped out. As mentioned at the beginning of this letter we understand that these financial problems are no fault of anyone currently serving in City Hall. We hope they understand that city employees aren't at fault either. Cutting public safety as a knee jerk reaction to get out of this mess comes at the peril of the citizens as well as employees already tasked with dangerous jobs. We would be happy to meet with city officials and come up with a collaborative approach to get through this tough time and help move the city forward.

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