
OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT

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Proposed Minimum Staffing for Fire Engines and Fire Trucks Council Policy

OVERVIEW

On Tuesday, September 28, 2010, the City Council will be asked to approve Council Policy 500-09, "Minimum Staffing for Fire Engines and Fire Trucks". As proposed, this Council Policy will communicate the City Council's desire and intent to maintain four-member crew staffing for City fire engines and trucks.

This item was heard at the Public Safety & Neighborhood Services (PS&NS) Committee on June 30, 2010 and July 28, 2010. At the June 30, 2010 meeting, a Committee motion to forward the item to Council failed with a 2-2 vote. The item was again heard at the July 28, 2010 PS&NS meeting with further analysis from the City Attorney's Office on issues raised during the June 30th meeting regarding meet and confer requirements, Charter duties of the Mayor and Council, and the format and consistency of the proposed Council Policy. The Mayor's Office also presented information on the scope of a study to be conducted by a consultant that will review the Fire-Rescue Department's resource deployment and staffing. At the July 28th meeting, the Committee voted 4-0 to forward the item to Council, as amended by the Committee, with a recommendation of support.

Although there have been no proposals from the Mayor's Office regarding a reduction of current Fire-Rescue Department staffing protocol for fire trucks and engines, this issue is being studied within the context of a projected \$72 million General Fund deficit for FY 2012, with recent direction from the Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer for departments to submit proposals for budget reductions meeting assigned targets for

FY 2012. The Fire-Rescue Department target is \$7.2 million. This is in addition to the \$9.2 million in net reductions taken in the current year. Adopting Council Policy 500-09 would express Council's desire not to consider fire engine or truck staffing reductions as an option for meeting the City's budget reduction goals, and to maintain a minimum of four-person staffing.

The purpose of this report is to review some of the issues that the Council should consider in determining whether to adopt Council Policy 500-09 at this time.

FISCAL/POLICY DISCUSSION

Consultant Study & Industry Standards & Practices

The Mayor's Office has engaged CityGate Associates in a six month resource deployment study that will assess the City of San Diego's current fire-rescue services. By the end of the calendar year, it is expected that CityGate will present its findings and recommendations for the City. Among a number of issues relating to resource deployment, the effectiveness of the department's current engine and truck staffing policy, within the confines of unique community needs and conditions will be assessed. When the study is completed, more information will be available regarding the City's deployment options and the trade-offs involved.

Of all of the fire agencies within the County of San Diego, the City of San Diego remains one of the few with four-person staffing for fire engines and trucks. Out of 53 fire agencies, the majority of them have three-person crews. The Alpine Protection Fire District, Bonita Sunnyside Fire Protection District, National City, and the City of Coronado, are among the few that have four-person staffing model for their apparatus. National City and the City of Coronado use four-person crews for their trucks, but three-person crews for their engines.

As reviewed in Report No. 10-097, from the PS&NS Committee Consultant and Council District 3 staff, national industry standards and scientific research support a minimum of four-person staffing for fire engines and trucks to insure the most effective fire-rescue support for the safety of both citizens and firefighters. The National Fire Protection Association 1710 Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments advises that engine and truck companies should be staffed with a minimum of four personnel. The International Association of Fire Chiefs and the International Association of Fire Fighters also endorse a four-person staffing standard. Recent studies by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) in 2009, and in 2010, by San Diego State University, document the effectiveness of four-person crews as compared to 2, 3, and 5 member crews in residential and wildfire settings, respectively.

Due to a federal statute referred to as the Two-In/Two-Out Policy, a minimum four-person crew is optimal for onsite fire-rescue operations. With the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal-OSHA) Two-In/Two-Out Rule, in order to begin to attack the interior source of a fire, or enter a structure for search and rescue, two firefighters can enter, but two must remain outside to be available for the rescue of the two firefighters who have entered the structure, if necessary.

Medical Calls for Service

It is the case that the majority of calls for service to the Fire-Rescue Department are for medical emergencies. In FY 2010, 85.64% of Fire-Rescue calls were for medical emergencies, with only 14.36% for fire emergencies and other calls. In making a case for a reduction in staffing for fire engines and trucks, proponents may argue that with smaller crews, more crews can be available to respond to medical calls faster. It may be the case that a crew can be available with a shorter response time, but the care administered may be compromised, as compared to that of a larger crew. It is the position of industry professionals, that in a medical emergency, with larger crews each member can simultaneously assist with the various tasks necessary to address patient's needs, making the medical response more timely and efficient.

Budgetary Impacts

As mentioned early in this report, with a projected deficit in the General Fund of at least \$72 million for FY 2012, City departments have to submit proposals to meet assigned budget reduction targets by October 4, 2010. The Fire-Rescue Department target is \$7.2 million. After many years of cuts to the department budget, few options remain aside from those that will have a direct impact on department service levels. During the FY 2011 budget process, the department's General Fund budget was reduced by \$9.2 million, in net, with the majority of the savings resulting from the implementation of rolling brown-outs for fire engines within the City. Reductions that were avoided included the closure of fire stations and sworn staff layoffs. Within this context, reductions in fire truck and engine staffing levels may have to be considered for future budget reductions.

Budgetary cost savings from a proposed reduction in fire truck and engine staffing would primarily come from sworn staffing reductions. There are 180 four-person crews within the Fire-Rescue Department. A reduction in crew size to, for example, a three-person crew could lead to the elimination of 180 sworn positions. The full elimination of 180 sworn positions would occur if three-person staffing for trucks and engines is implemented in conjunction with rolling brown-outs. Per the department, if three-person staffing is implemented in-lieu of brown-outs, the net number of positions eliminated would be 132 (assuming the restoral of 48 budgeted positions eliminated with the implementation of the rolling brown-outs).

The Fire-Rescue Department would have to perform comprehensive staff modeling analysis to determine the true savings that could be achieved with the two outlined scenarios, given the number of variables that must be considered. These variables would

include the mitigation of savings due to overtime requirements to meet staffing demands throughout the fiscal year.

Brown-outs and staffing reductions for firefighting crews are both viable strategies for budgetary reductions. Whether one could create greater savings than the other or the savings are similar is yet to be determined by staff. The Fire Chief maintains that when faced with the need for budget reductions, brown-outs are preferred over a reduction in crew size based on his professional experience and accepted industry best practices.

Council 500-09 Policy Adoption

Adopting Council Policy 500-09 would express Council’s desire to maintain four-person crews and not consider fire engine or truck staffing reductions as an option for meeting the City’s budget reduction goals. Per the separation of duties outlined in the City Charter for the legislative and executive branches of the government, it will not be able to direct the administrative options considered by the Mayor in the FY 2012 Proposed budget or future budgets.

With the current projected deficit for FY 2012, and few options after many years of cuts, a reduction in staffing for fire engines and trucks may have to be considered. Whether this option will be considered will not be known until the City is further along in the budgetary process, at the latest April 2011. In the interim, the study being conducted by CityGate Associates will be able to provide more data regarding the most effective deployment and staffing scenarios for the Fire-Rescue Department given the unique characteristics of the City including typography, community needs, and available resources. This study will help to inform the consideration of a reduction in staffing for fire engines and trucks. Due to this, the IBA recommends waiting for the results of the study prior to adoption of a Council Policy.

CONCLUSION

The City is currently faced with the difficult challenge of providing a desired level of services to its citizenry, amid continuing limitations on the financial resources to support those services. This report reviews some of the issues to consider in determining whether to, at this time, adopt Council Policy 500-09 to establish the Council’s intent to maintain the City’s current four-person staffing on fire trucks and engines amid the fiscal challenges ahead. The Fire-Rescue Department makes up 16.6% of the General Fund budget. Given the size of the deficit and that the department has to identify \$7.2 million in additional reductions, all options will need to remain on the table.

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