
OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT

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Fire-Rescue Helicopter Acquisition

The IBA supports the acquisition of a second Fire-Rescue Helicopter and finds the supporting information on this item to be sufficient to recommend approval by the City Council. However, we wish to comment on the staffing needs in the Fire-Rescue Department to operate Copter 2. As stated in the Executive Summary, the department states that the staffing expense of \$1.4 million in FY 2009 is not needed, because there are a number of positions held vacant that could be transferred to support Copter 2.

This raises three issues: First, if these positions will no longer remain vacant, \$1.4 million will need to be added to the department's budget in FY 2009 to reduce their vacancy factor and avoid their going over budget. The net effect is the same as staffing needs for Copter 2 - \$1.4 million.

Second, the department is effectively suggesting that these positions are not needed in the foreseeable future for their previously assigned roles. Even though the department may not expect to fill those positions in FY 2009, the IBA questions whether those positions are truly excess positions that are never going to be needed for their currently assigned function. This is hard to believe given the well-documented unmet needs of Fire-Rescue. If those currently assigned functions may need to be performed by staff in the near future, it may be more prudent and accurate to keep those positions, and their current vacancy factor, in the budget (as was done for Police Department, Northwestern Station) rather than losing those positions from that function and decreasing the vacancy factor.

Finally, in the past, the City has underfunded known commitments including Police and Fire overtime, public safety fleet replacements, and Police IT costs, pushing the problem to the future. The Mayor has worked hard to correct budget mistakes of the past. Increasing services to the community also requires an accurate assessment of the cost of such service. The true cost of staffing a second helicopter is \$1.4 million. If these positions and funds are simply transferred from other Fire-Rescue services rather than added to the budget, it should be publicly acknowledged that some other service levels may not be met as a result.

These questions do not need to be answered prior to the approval of this item, but should be addressed during the FY 2009 Budget Deliberations.

Penni Takade
Deputy Director

APPROVED: Andrea Tevlin
Independent Budget Analyst