

## **FIRE COMMITTEE MINUTES**

November 18, 2004

The Fire Committee of the City of Mesa met in the lower level meeting room of the Council Chambers, 57 East 1st Street, on November 18, 2004 at 9:30 a.m.

COMMITTEE PRESENT	COUNCIL PRESENT	OFFICERS PRESENT
Mike Whalen, Chairman Rex Griswold Janie Thom	None	None

1. Hear a presentation on the implementation of a new staffing review and forecast system.

Mesa Fire Chief Harry Beck addressed the Committee and reported that the City's Fire and Police Departments are encountering a staffing situation with regards to the Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP) program. He explained that the program allows public safety employees to maintain City employment after retiring per the Public Safety Personnel Retirement System (PSPRS). Chief Beck introduced Deputy Chief Garret Olson, who conducted significant research relative to the impact of the DROP program on the Fire Department, and said he is prepared to provide the Committee with an overview of this item.

Chief Olson expressed appreciation to the Committeemembers for the opportunity to speak with them and introduced Administrative Services Specialist Radona Orlando, who he said was available to respond to any technical or financial questions the members may have.

Chairman Whalen commended Chief Olson for his efforts and hard work in the drafting of a professional and well-written report.

Chief Olson referred to a Power Point presentation in the Council Chambers and provided a short synopsis of the Mesa Fire Department Staffing Forecast and Plan for 2004 – 2009. He stated, among other things, that there is a philosophical change in the Fire Department's hiring policy from a reactive model to a statistical database-centered model; that the Department's current hiring practice has worked well given the Department's history of modest attrition; that the explosive growth and hiring of the 1980s is about to change the Department's attrition statistics; that in 2001, the DROP program was adopted, which enabled the Department to defer sizeable personnel costs five years into the future and also to retain more senior, highly-trained employees (who possess various certifications) beyond the typical retirement cycle; that the Department currently has 144 sworn personnel eligible for retirement in five years, including 52 participants in the DROP program; that the DROP participants have provided Fire

Administration with their anticipated retirement dates between 2006 and 2009; and that employees in the DROP program must retire within 60 months of entering the program or face severe financial penalties.

Chief Olson displayed graphics depicting a breakdown of DROP members by rank in the Fire Department scheduled for retirement between 2006 and 2009. He advised that the data includes 6 Battalion Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs, 26 Captains, 13 Engineers, 7 Firefighters, 12 Paramedics and 14 Aircraft Rescue Firefighters (ARFF). Chief Olson commented that in the past, vacancies would be covered until the next planned hiring or certification cycle. He cautioned, however, that with an average of 12 senior members retiring annually between 2006 and 2009, the Department would be unable to cover such vacancies unless a new staffing plan is instituted.

Chief Olson further reported that the Fire Department has taken a proactive hiring stance with regard to growth (i.e., the opening of a new Fire station or implementing a new fire apparatus), but noted that what it has not done is conduct proactive certification training. He stated that the DROP program has provided statistical data that was unavailable previously and noted that the Department intends to utilize such information to continue its service level delivery without gaps in service or personnel.

Chief Olson provided a comparative analysis of the Department's current and proposed staffing practices regarding the replacement, for example, of a firefighter with Paramedic and ARFF certifications who entered the DROP program in 2001 and is scheduled to terminate with the City in 2006. He reported that under the current program, the Department would wait to hire a replacement until after the firefighter retired; that the new recruit would participate in a five-month training program and subsequently be deployed to a response unit; that only at that point in time would there be sufficient personnel to cover for another firefighter to receive additional training and certification; and that the entire process could take approximately 17 months. Chief Olson stated that with staff's new proposal, the Department would plan for the service delivery replacement date of December 2006 by backtracking the hiring process and certification training to ensure that a new firefighter would be trained and certified to take the retiree's place.

Chief Olson outlined the updated staffing guidelines as follows:

Institute a proactive hiring philosophy based on current quantifiable data including:

- Annual staffing review for inclusion in the budget.
- Hire, train and certify members in time for service.
- Adjust "personnel replacement planning date" for each employee in the DROP program based on the timeline to replace his/her performance expectations or certifications.

Committeemember Thom expressed concerns regarding the large number of Captains as compared to firefighters currently enrolled in the DROP program and questioned whether the Fire Department Administration might be "top heavy." She asked whether it would be appropriate to re-prioritize the Department.

In response to Committeemember Thom's comments, Chief Olson clarified that in his opinion, the disparate number of high-ranking individuals in the DROP program is primarily a factor of

seniority. He explained that the longer an individual is employed with the Department, the more likely he or she is to be promoted within the organization.

Discussion ensued relative to the organizational structure of the Fire Department; that it is the recommendation of staff that a spring 2005 Firefighter-Recruit Academy be held for 14 firefighter-recruits, including 10 positions from current vacancies and four positions from projected vacancies in FY 2004/2005; and that by 2007, the number of recruits would increase as a result of a greater number of DROP participants scheduled to retire at that time.

Committeemember Griswold commented that a proactive hiring philosophy is an appropriate way in which to address this issue and commended staff for their forethought with regard to this matter. He added that the Fire Department, like many other City departments, was asked to streamline its budget in the last few years and has successfully done so.

In response to a series of questions from Committeemember Thom, Chief Beck clarified that staff is not asking for Committee action on this item at the present time and that the City Manager would forward the matter to the full Council when he deemed it appropriate. He stated that the Department has a minimum staffing level of four-man crews and is funded to maintain that level. Chief Beck added that the proposed staffing plan would accomplish those levels throughout the cycle of high turnover in the Department.

Further discussion ensued relative to the fact that the Fire Department does not hire lateral firefighters, but endeavors to recruit personnel already trained and certified, for example, as paramedics and Hazardous Materials (Hazmat) first responders; and possible future topics of discussion regarding the civilianization of various components of the Fire Department such as training and research and development, but not as first responders.

Chairman Whalen expressed appreciation to staff for the informative presentation.

## 2. Hear an update on the 800 MHz (Megahertz) project.

Chief Beck reported that for several years, the City of Mesa, in partnership with the City of Phoenix, has worked towards replacing the aging VHF radio systems with an 800 Megahertz (MHz) system. He introduced Deputy Chief of Technical Services Rich Upham to provide the Committee with an update on this matter.

Chief Upham explained that the Fire Department was originally scheduled to transition onto the 800 MHz system in October of this year after the Police Department completed its implementation. He stated, however, that as a result of various delays at the Police Department, it is now anticipated that the Fire Department would implement the new system in April of 2005.

Chief Upham outlined the following updates regarding the 800 MHz project:

- The Fire Department has purchased 240 portable radios and 90 mobile radios to be used in conjunction with the system.
- All City emergency response personnel have been trained on the use of the new radios and received training over the past four quarterly training cycles.

- The Fire Department completed an area coverage test and two phases of comprehensive “in-building” coverage tests. The first test targeted buildings that were previously identified by emergency response personnel to be problem areas. The second test was completed by emergency response personnel and targeted two buildings of their choice (of various construction types) in each square mile of the City. Both tests received positive results, with excellent “in-building” coverage across the City.
- In October 2004, the Apache Junction Fire District, which contracts with Mesa for dispatch services and works closely with the Mesa Fire Department, implemented the 800 MHz system. This allowed system tests in fire conditions and enabled a patch to the current VHF system. The City intends to continue to patch to the VHF system to ensure interoperability with Chandler, Tempe and Phoenix until Phoenix Fire Department transitions to the new system.
- The Fire Department will continue to coordinate with the Mesa Police Department and other regional partners to ensure interoperability across the metro Phoenix area.

Discussion ensued relative to the fact that the Maricopa County Sheriff’s Department currently operates a different 800 MHz system than the one being implemented by Mesa; that local police departments are endeavoring to communicate with the Sheriff’s Department through the use of patches (by installing a control station) at the Sheriff’s dispatch center; that the Mesa Fire Department does not typically participate in lake rescues, however, the Apache Junction Fire District does and is seeking a grant to extend the 800 MHz system to the Canyon Lake area.

Chief Beck advised that with regard to future demand for the 800 MHz system, Mesa provides an infrastructure with a particular footprint for coverage, and if a particular agency has specialty coverage requirements, that entity would be required to attach those needs to the infrastructure to support such a request.

In response to a series of questions from Chairman Whalen, Chief Upham clarified that the Gilbert Fire Department will transition onto the 800 MHz system at the same time as Mesa. He noted that the Gilbert Police Department was the first agency to implement the system. Chief Upham added that Mesa would continue to maintain its current VHF system to communicate with Rural Metro, but that eventually Rural Metro would have to “buy into the system” or Mesa would be required to resolve various issues with regards to control stations in Rural Metro’s dispatch center.

Chief Beck commented on the need for interoperability throughout the State and said he anticipates that a number of agencies such as the Sheriff’s Department, the Gila River Indian Community and the Department of Public Safety are looking forward to joining the Mesa and Phoenix partnership and participating in the 800 MHz system. He commented that as a member of a statewide communications committee, he has become aware of the fact that the State not only wants to be a partner within the Phoenix/Mesa system, but is also considering adding the system on all major freeways throughout Arizona.

Chairman Whalen advised, for the benefit of his fellow Committeemembers, that Chief Beck was originally employed with the Phoenix Fire Department and was one of the pioneers with regards to the 800 MHz system.

Further discussion ensued relative to the fact that there are other 800 MHz radio systems currently in use in the Phoenix metro area that are not digital radio systems; that as the analog systems become more dated, it may be financially feasible for other agencies to pay a fee and participate in the 800 MHz system and thereby build greater interoperability throughout the State and the nation; and that Federal government agencies, such as the FBI and ATF, currently operate on a trunked VHF radio system, but that there are plans to patch their system into the 800 MHz system.

In response to a question from Committeemember Griswold, Chief Upham stated that there are several layers of redundancy built into the 800 MHz system and assured the Committee that it would be "almost impossible" to destroy the entire system by disabling a single radio tower.

Chairman Whalen expressed appreciation to staff for their expertise and hard work relative to this important issue.

3. Adjournment.

Without objection, the Fire Committee meeting adjourned at 11:00 a.m.

I hereby certify that the foregoing minutes are a true and correct copy of the minutes of the meeting of the Fire Committee of the City of Mesa, Arizona, held on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of November 2004. I further certify that the meeting was duly called and held and that a quorum was present.

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BARBARA JONES, CITY CLERK