

## **FIRE COMMITTEE MINUTES**

September 20, 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 September 20, 2004 at 3:05 p.m.

**COMMITTEE PRESENT**

Mike Whalen, Chairman  
Rex Griswold  
Janie Thom

**COUNCIL PRESENT**

None

**STAFF PRESENT**

Mike Hutchinson

1. Discuss and consider several issues associated with the Mesa Fire Code:

Fire Chief Harry Beck reported that staff has spent a considerable amount of time and effort in responding to Council's direction regarding various applications in the Mesa Fire Code that may be unnecessary. He explained that in particular, staff has drafted a proposed amendment that would offer relief to business owners who operate small non-hazardous types of enterprises in the form of an exemption for new construction projects from the automatic sprinkler requirement. (Item a). Chief Beck commented that it is important to note that with the elimination of fire sprinklers in a building, the level of safety is reduced and stated that if a fire were to occur, the structure's contents would sustain more damage than if a sprinkler system had been utilized. He added that items b and c are additional proposals to modernize the Code. He introduced staff members Assistant Fire Chief Dan Stubbs and Assistant to the Fire Chief Dorinda Cline.

- a. A proposed amendment to exempt new B Occupancies less than 5,000 square feet from the automatic sprinkler requirements.

Chief Stubbs referred to a Power Point presentation and provided a brief overview of this agenda item. He stated that Chandler, Gilbert, Goodyear, Peoria, Phoenix and Scottsdale require that all new commercial buildings are equipped with automatic fire sprinklers; that the proposed Fire Code amendment would exempt new B Occupancies under 5,000 square feet from the automatic fire sprinkler requirement; that examples of such businesses would include banks, beauty and barber shops, dry cleaners, outpatient clinics (without surgery), adult education, print shops and professional services such as architects, accountants, dentists and engineers; that the total aggregate of the building must be under 5,000 square feet; and that the firewall provision would not apply for determining building area.

Chief Stubbs commented that if a builder elected to utilize the B Occupancies exemption, the following “tradeoffs” would not apply if a structure were not equipped with fire sprinklers:

- The use of certain construction types. (More expensive construction, such as noncombustible materials, may be required.)
- Unrated exit corridors.
- Distance from property line to adjacent structures. (Infill properties could be impacted if they are limited in their proximity to property lines.)
- Fire Department access and required turnaround allowances (in both instances, within a distance of 300 feet to a building with automatic sprinklers versus 150 feet with no sprinkler system).
- A reduction in the number of onsite fire hydrants.

Chief Stubbs stated that it is important for the business community to consider that when a builder is designing a project, the perception may be that he is saving money upfront by not installing the automatic sprinkler system, when in reality it may cost him more in the long run by not doing so.

Committeemember Griswold expressed appreciation to staff for their efforts and hard work concerning this item. He stated that it was the goal of the Council to provide builders with options and greater flexibility regarding the installation of automatic sprinkler systems in smaller buildings and noted that in most instances, it is more cost effective to do so. Committeemember Griswold commented that he would prefer that the proposed amendment also address those buildings under 5,000 square feet without sprinkler systems which have undergone business occupancy changes. He suggested that under such circumstances, the Fire Department could perform annual building inspections to ensure that no hazardous materials are associated with the new usage and added that the building owner could be assessed a yearly inspection fee as well.

In follow-up to Committeemember Griswold’s suggestions, Chief Stubbs clarified that should a property owner decide to change the business occupancy, a requirement to retrofit the building with sprinklers has been included in the proposed amendment. He stated that staff considered imposing an inspection fee, but opted for the retrofit requirement. Chief Stubbs also noted that the Fire Department would inspect the premises on an annual basis and added that the retrofit requirement would impact only the new code.

Discussion ensued among the Committeemembers relative to agenda items b and c.

It was moved by Committeemember Griswold, seconded by Committeemember Thom, to direct staff to proceed with a proposed amendment to the Mesa Fire Code to exempt new B Occupancies less than 5,000 square feet from the automatic sprinkler requirement and that the imposition of an inspection fee be left to staff’s discretion.

Carried unanimously.

- b. A proposed amendment requiring new and existing buildings five floors or more above grade or structures two floors under grade to install a breathing air replacement system.

Chief Stubbs explained that mid-rise, high-rise and underground facilities pose unique challenges to emergency responders, and in particular, providing breathing air bottles for firefighters during emergency operations. He stated that the Breathing Air Replacement System (BAR system) is a self-contained breathing system that would allow firefighters to refill empty breathing cylinders inside the building, thereby reducing the amount of travel distance, time and support personnel required in an emergency situation. Chief Stubbs commented that the BAR system contains an alarm and if the seal leaks or becomes contaminated, Fire personnel can easily remedy the situation to ensure proper air quality. He also stressed that the building owner would not be required to perform mechanical maintenance on the system. Chief Stubbs added that Chandler and Phoenix have proceeded in this direction.

Discussion ensued relative to the fact that the proposed BAR system would be required in buildings five floors or more above grade and underground buildings and structures totaling 10,000 square feet or more than two floors below grade; that the refill stations would be installed starting on the third floor, followed with installation on every other floor; that the average cost per floor is approximately \$3800 (either new or retrofit), with an annual maintenance cost of \$900; that existing buildings of five floors or more would be required to retrofit the BAR system by 2009; that shopping malls, such as Superstition Springs, would not fall under this amendment; that Mesa currently has 12 buildings that would fall under the retrofit requirement including hotels, hospitals, Mesa City Plaza and One Macdonald Center Building; and that the placement of the BAR system in the evacuation stairwell of a building would be identified on Fire personnel maps to ensure that the firefighters are familiar with its location.

Committeemember Thom stated the opinion that an existing building that will require the BAR system retrofit should not be required to do so until such time as the owner renovates or makes additions to the structure.

In response to Committeemember Thom's comment, Chief Stubbs explained that such language could be included in the proposed amendment. He noted that a majority of the above-referenced 12 buildings conduct some type of major renovation on a fairly regular basis, (i.e., every five years) and stated that the retrofit requirement by 2009 would fall within that timeframe.

Committeemember Griswold expressed support for Chief Stubbs' suggestions and commented that it would also enable the owners to incorporate the BAR system retrofit costs into their building renovation budget.

In response to a series of questions from Chairman Whalen, Chief Stubbs clarified that there are private companies that sell, install and service the BAR system; that the \$900 annual maintenance cost of the BAR system was based on a 14-story building; and that structures with fewer floors would likely be charged a lesser amount.

Discussion ensued among the Committeemembers relative to agenda item c.

Further discussion ensued relative to the fact that nationwide, a mid-rise building is considered anything over four stories; that staff selected the "five stories or more above grade" criteria for

the installation of the BAR system to remain consistent with other Valley cities that have adopted the ordinance; that for ten years, Fire Marshals throughout the country have discussed this matter in an attempt to improve the safety and welfare of their fellow firefighters; and that the events of 9/11 at the New York City World Trade Center brought the issue of the challenges faced by firefighters during emergency operations to the forefront.

Committeemember Thom requested that the Committee be provided data from the businesses that sell, install and service the BAR system in order to garner more substantial information regarding the cost of the system.

Chief Beck assured the Committeemembers that now is an opportune time for the Council to adopt this proposed amendment to the Fire Code. He explained that Mesa has "only a handful" of buildings that would need to be retrofitted with the BAR system and advised that although the building owners would incur some costs, the capabilities that the system would offer to firefighters and building occupants in the event of a catastrophic fire would far outweigh such costs.

It was moved by Committeemember Griswold that staff be directed to draft a proposed amendment requiring new and existing buildings five floors or more above grade or structures two floors under grade to install a breathing air replacement system, that the amendment include the requirement for an annual inspection of the system, that staff confirm the fee structure and installation costs of the BAR system, and that the Committeemembers be provided with information from the companies that sell, install and inspect the BAR system regarding the actual costs.

Committeemember Thom seconded the motion with the following addition: that language be included in the amendment to reflect that existing buildings would not be required to adhere to the retrofit requirement until such time as the structure is remodeled and/or additions are made.

Committeemember Griswold concurred with the amended motion.

Chairman Whalen voiced support for the motion.

Carried unanimously.

- c. Provide direction regarding the implementation of a fee structure for events such as carnivals, fireworks, burn permits, etc.

Chief Stubbs reported that unlike many other Valley cities, the Mesa Fire Department does not charge for operational inspections. He advised that examples of such inspections include carnivals, fairs, fireworks displays, tents, hazardous materials inventory and residential care facilities. Chief Stubbs stated that it would take considerable staff time to develop a fee schedule and collection procedure for the 11 operational permits currently listed in the Mesa Fire Code. He requested direction from the Committeemembers as to whether they would like staff to pursue this issue and bring back a report to the Committee in approximately six months. He stressed that the additional charges would be passed on to Mesa's customers, including schools and charitable organizations.

Chief Beck explained that the surrounding communities often impose fees in order to recover a portion of the cost associated with operational inspections, with full cost recovery being extremely expensive.

Committeemember Griswold stated that he is supportive of user fees and would encourage staff to research this matter and come back to the Committee with their findings.

Committeemember Thom voiced opposition to charging operational inspection fees relative to youth (i.e., school carnivals, fundraisers and Boy Scouts) and charitable events, but would be willing to consider imposing fees for trade shows and for-profit events that are not oriented toward community projects.

It was moved by Committeemember Griswold, seconded by Committeemember Thom, to direct staff to proceed with a study regarding the implementation of a fee structure for events such as carnivals, fireworks, burn permits, et cetera and to present their findings at a future Fire Committee meeting.

Carried unanimously.

Chairman Whalen expressed appreciation to staff for the presentation.

2. Hear an update on Fire Department manpower and station location deployment issues.

Fire Chief Harry Beck reported that this agenda item is to update the Committee relative to the demographics impacting the Fire Department's deployment of resources throughout the City. He explained that although it is common knowledge that Mesa anticipates the need for additional fire stations to accommodate growth in the outer fringes of the community, an increase in calls for emergency services in the downtown and western areas of the City also continues to grow. Chief Beck introduced Assistant Fire Chief Gil Damiani to the Committeemembers.

Chief Damiani referred to a Power Point presentation and provided an overview of a series of factors, obstacles and needs of the Fire Department regarding deployment. He stated that the Fire Department has adopted an emergency response time goal of four minutes or less 90% of the time; that the four-minute response time relates to the survivability of individuals involved in fire and emergency medical response situations; that at the end of July 2004, the Department's average response time was four minutes or less 68% of the time; and that key factors involved in the deployment of emergency response units include dispatch protocols (EMS 76% vs. Fire 24%), maintaining units for calls, station location and unit location.

Chief Damiani referred the Committeemembers to a map entitled "2003 Fire and EMS Incidents," which reflects the City's high-density call volumes. (See Attachment.) He explained that approximately 50% of the calls the Department responds to (25,000 calls per year) are located west of Gilbert Road. Chief Damiani also highlighted the areas on the map where the City has purchased vacant land for future station sites, as well as other locations within the community where it hopes to purchase additional land. He added that by build-out, there would be approximately 27 to 28 fire stations located throughout Mesa.

Chief Damiani provided a short synopsis of the 2004 Year-to-Date Call Volumes as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter Call Volume - 13,208, a 5.6% increase from 2003.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter Call Volume - 25,934, a 4.7% increase from 2003.
- Average increase of 5.2% thus far this year. Estimated 2004 Call Volume is 51,868.

Chief Damiani concluded his remarks by noting that as Chairman of the Fire Department's Deployment Committee, he and his fellow Committeemembers are continuing to review and evaluate more efficient and timely methods by which to provide emergency services to the community.

Committeemember Thom questioned why the Fire Department responds to emergency medical service calls in a fire truck as opposed to a smaller vehicle such as an SUV. She commented that in her opinion, it is not cost effective to do so and inquired whether the system could be changed.

In response to Committeemember Thom's inquiry, Chief Beck clarified that the fire service that the City of Mesa provides is multifaceted and explained that each company contains firefighters, hazmat technicians, rescue technicians, EMTs and paramedics. He stated that because the City provides a full level of service at all times, without the proper equipment his staff would be unable to perform such duties. Chief Beck also commented that his Department has determined that it is appropriate to dispatch a fire truck with four firefighters to an emergency medical service call so that in the event the call is completed, the crew would be immediately available to respond to other types of calls. He added that some cities have attempted to separate their emergency medical service from their fire service and concluded that it is extremely expensive to do so.

City Manager Mike Hutchinson advised that over the course of this fiscal year, he anticipates the Council would be presented with a number of requests to purchase land for future fire stations.

3. Hear an update on the implementation of a new staffing review and forecast system.

Mr. Hutchinson stated that the Council and Fire Committee had requested that the Fire Department make a presentation regarding the Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP) program and its impact on personnel needs for the next five years. He stated that due to time constraints this afternoon, he would recommend that the item be brought back to the Fire Committee at its next meeting. Mr. Hutchinson stated that one of the primary issues associated with this matter is the need for a Fire academy next spring.

Chairman Whalen commented that because of a variety of issues currently affecting the Fire Department, he would suggest that the Fire Committee meet on a more frequent basis (i.e., once a month or every six weeks).

In response to Chairman Whalen's request, Chief Beck stated that he would be happy to provide more frequent presentations.

Committeemember Griswold commented that as a future topic of discussion, he would like to hear a presentation on fire impact fees.

4. Adjournment.

Without objection, the Fire Committee meeting adjourned at 4:00 p.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 20<sup>th</sup> day of September 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

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Attachment