



FIRE COMMITTEE MINUTES

April 18, 2005

The Fire Committee of the City of Mesa met in the lower level meeting room of the Council Chambers, 57 East 1st Street, on April 18, 2005 at 3:31 p.m.

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

Chairman Whalen excused Committeemember Griswold from the beginning of the meeting. He arrived at 3:37 p.m.

Fire Chief Harry Beck introduced Deputy Fire Chief Bob Horn and Assistant Fire Chief Cliff Puckett, and advised that staff was present to update the Committee regarding fire prevention and deployment issues.

1. Hear an update on services provided by Mesa Fire Prevention.

Chief Puckett utilized a PowerPoint presentation (a copy is available for review in the City Clerk's Office) to report on his area of responsibility, the Fire Department's Community Services Division. He explained that the division includes three sections: Fire and Life Safety Education, Public Information and Fire Prevention. Chief Puckett noted that a presentation on Fire and Life Safety Education was provided at the January 20th Fire Committee meeting. He added that Fire and Life Safety Education and Fire Prevention are commonly defined as "support" services, but he advised that in reality these areas provide "front line" services to the community.

Chief Puckett addressed the need for fire prevention by recalling recent tragic events that were caused by fire code violations, buildings not equipped with sprinklers, insufficient fire drill procedures, buildings that were not inspected, and arson. He stated that the City of Mesa Fire Department has dealt with similar incidents that had the potential to result in tragic consequences. Chief Puckett explained that fire prevention activities such as code enforcement and fire prevention education benefit the City by insuring the continued operation of businesses, which provide jobs and services for our citizens and sales tax revenue to the City. He noted that in addition to protecting the lives of citizens and visitors, fire prevention activities also minimize the City's potential liability. Chief Puckett added that regular fire inspections also protect the lives of firefighters by enabling the department to identify and address structural weaknesses, the presence of dangerous chemicals or other potential hazards.

Chief Horn advised that the Fire Prevention Program provides four primary services to the community: code enforcement, fire investigation, fire prevention education and fire system maintenance. He noted that code enforcement is considered to be the main activity, and he reported that the City's 14,500 businesses are prioritized for inspection based on risk, hazard, and occupancy classification. He added that the businesses are placed on an inspection schedule and assigned to eight inspectors, who are responsible for approximately 7,000 business inspections. Chief Horn stated that the Partners in Prevention (PIP) Program is utilized to address the remaining 7,500 "low hazard" businesses. He explained that Fire Department personnel deliver packets of information to low-hazard businesses, and that the business owners independently complete a form, which is submitted to the department. Chief Horn also noted that the process of delivering the packet enables department personnel to interact with the business owners, answer any questions and obtain current contact information.

Chief Horn stated that the department also responds to citizen complaints and conducts inspections during or prior to activities such as carnivals, fire works shows, trade shows and other special events. He noted that this activity often requires after-hours work for staff.

Chief Horn reported that the department has three fire investigators, and that the City of Mesa experienced 265 structure fires last year, or one fire every 33 hours. He noted that an investigation of each fire is important in order to track trends, identify risks, create educational programs and adjust service based statistical data. Chief Horn advised that cooking was the leading cause of residential fires last year, followed by careless smoking, and that arson was the leading cause of commercial building fires followed by electrical problems. He added that weekly fire lists are provided to department staff so that similar problems in other response areas can be detected.

Chief Horn stated that additional educational programs are offered at public events utilizing a mobile education unit that demonstrates the lifesaving benefits of residential sprinklers. He advised that the website also offers information on bee safety, fire drills, smoke detectors, propane safety, fire extinguishers and many other frequently asked questions.

Addressing the subject of fire system maintenance, Chief Horn advised that this area of responsibility includes the Knox Box, automatic fire protection systems and automatic entry gates. He explained that Knox Boxes are secure boxes installed on buildings for which the Fire Department has a key. He added that the boxes contain all of the keys necessary to enable immediate access to a building after hours in the event of a fire or other emergency. He noted that the Knox lock is a similar system utilized on entry gates, and that a gate master key enables access by the Fire Department. Chief Horn stated that over 3,300 locations in Mesa have the Knox system in place, and he noted that the department is charged with the responsibility of inspecting the locks to ensure effective operation. Chief Horn said that the City of Mesa has over 5,000 automatic fire protection systems, including hood systems on cooking equipment and sprinkler systems in hotels, apartments and businesses, each of which requires an annual inspection. He noted that private contractors who conduct inspections are required to report their findings to the Fire Prevention Office. Chief Horn advised that approximately 100 private inspection forms are received each week and entered into the Fire Department's system. He noted that some private inspections require a follow-up by the department in order to verify that identified problems have been corrected.

Chief Puckett noted the importance of updating the Committee relative to service level deficiencies. He said that the department's goal to contact each business on an annual basis is being met only 47 percent of the time. Chief Puckett reported that the types of businesses that are not being inspected include operations such as Sears at Superstition Springs, Home Depot and Lowe's. He advised that every fire is investigated to some degree, and that 162 of the 265 fires in 2004 required investigation by the department's three trained fire investigators. Chief Puckett noted that investigators must have substantial expertise and technical knowledge in order to process an arson case from the investigative phase to conviction, and he added that the process is very time consuming.

Chief Puckett advised that the department is making an effort to improve data collection systems and reports. He stated that letters are mailed to the parties responsible for approximately 9,000 systems in Mesa advising that an annual system check should be conducted. He also stated that the department has insufficient staff available to check and maintain certain systems, such as Knox Boxes. Chief Puckett recalled that a check of gated entries in northeast Mesa several years ago found that 60 percent of the gates were not accessible to emergency vehicles. He noted that the department presently has eight inspectors compared to a total of nine in 1998.

Chief Puckett said that other communities in the Valley have identified the Mesa model for residential sprinkler systems as the standard to follow. He stated that the Fire Department does not consider Mesa's program to be a success from a public safety standpoint because less than one percent of the residences in Mesa have installed fire sprinkler systems.

In response to questions from Chairman Whalen, Chief Puckett advised that inspections range from a day or two for large facilities to one hour for smaller businesses. He stated that businesses are normally provided 30 days in which to correct identified problems.

Discussion ensued relative to the fact that some violations may require the inspectors to return in order to verify that problems have been corrected; that inspections enable department personnel to maintain contacts with property owners and allow access to the property; and that the department's three fire investigators have dual certifications for police and fire.

Responding to a question from Committeemember Thom regarding overtime for special event inspections, Chief Puckett explained that adjustments to shift schedules in an effort to avoid incurring overtime expenses would result in regular inspection duties not being performed. He added that the department is proposing to implement a new fee to address the costs incurred for the special event inspections.

Chief Horn addressed a question from Committeemember Thom by advising that reasons for arson could include insurance fraud, business problems or disgruntled employees.

Committeemember Griswold advised that a large number of business bankruptcies occur every year, and he added that some are fire bankruptcies for insurance reasons. He noted that private companies presently conduct some fire inspections, and he suggested that the department consider expanding the program to include locations that stock flammable materials such as Home Depot and Lowe's or nail salons. Committeemember Griswold stated that private, certified companies could compete for the business, and that a report to the Fire Department could be required upon completion of the inspection.

Additional discussion ensued relative to the fact that the department could consider utilizing retirees to conduct inspections; that the Partners in Prevention (PIP) Program addresses the low-hazard businesses; that sending the business a review form prior to the actual inspection could simplify the process; that the department responded to over 500 false alarms to date this year; that the department follows up on false alarms to ensure that systems are operating correctly; and that repetitive false alarms could be legally addressed.

Committeemember Griswold suggested that the amount of the fine be increased for repetitive false alarms at the same location.

Chairman Whalen requested that staff provide information regarding the duties of fire inspectors in comparable communities.

Responding to a question from Committeemember Griswold, Chief Beck advised that the department has an excellent tracking system in place relative to the master key for Knox Boxes.

2. Hear an update on Fire Department deployment issues.

Chief Beck noted that Emergency Services is the department's highest profile component, and he added that the department continually strives to maintain the lowest possible response times while addressing sprawl and increased population density in the inner city. He stated that Assistant Chief Dan Stubbs and Deputy Chief Brady Leffler were present to address these issues.

Chief Stubbs advised that many of the challenges being discussed today would also be addressed during the upcoming budget presentations. He commented that 10 to 15 years ago, stations were built to address the needs of new growth as areas to the east were annexed into the City. He added that the department has been challenged by current infill development in addition to continued growth to the east during a time of budget constraints.

In regard to the department's goal of a four-minute response time, Chief Stubbs reported that the department presently meets the goal only 66 percent of the time. He advised that a person who has stopped breathing would experience clinical brain death within four to six minutes, and that in the case of a drowning incident, the response team should arrive within four minutes. Chief Stubbs explained that a free burning fire with no intervention could fill a room within eight to ten minutes, and he added that the danger of a roof collapsing on firefighters increases significantly after eight to ten minutes. He noted that the goal of a four-minute response has practical applications for both medical and fire calls.

Chief Stubbs stated that many factors have to be balanced in order to maintain the availability of units which are able to respond to calls for service, including call volumes, normal work loads, PIP's, training activities, and public safety events. He noted that future discussions regarding station locations would focus on "infill" areas in addition to the eastern growth areas of the City. Chief Stubbs advised that the number of calls for service increased an average of 3.5 percent per year over the past ten years, and he noted that the increase from 2003 to 2004 was almost six percent. He added that the Main Street corridor accounts for the majority of calls for service.

Chief Stubbs reported that Station 203 in the northwest corner was built in the 1950's and although some remodeling was accomplished last year, the station can accommodate only one unit. He added that the unit was not available to respond to 35 percent of the 4,000 calls for service received by the station last year. Chief Stubbs also identified new and proposed developments in east and north Mesa where the closest fire station is located ten miles away.

Addressing the subject of the two Adaptive Response Units (ARU's) that were approved by the Council in 1997, Chief Stubbs advised that each unit consists of a four-person engine company equipped with paramedics and emergency medical technicians (EMT's) that is designed to roam the City in order to provide coverage during staff training sessions, storms or other major incidents. He advised that Stations 201 and 205 received such a high volume of calls that the ARU's became a part of their regular response unit. He reported that the ARU at Station 201 responded to over 3,000 calls last year, and that the unit at Station 205 responded to over 2,000 calls. Chief Stubbs noted that the department is attempting to obtain property for a future infill station in the area of 56th and Main Streets. He also advised that ladder companies equipped with extrication devices are required in the east and southeast areas of Mesa in order to respond to automobile accidents involving newer vehicles, which are designed to absorb the impact and crumple around the occupant.

Chief Stubbs advised that the future need for aircraft firefighter rescue units, presently located at Stations 208 and 215, will correspond to future increases in commercial and passenger air traffic. He added that technical rescue units based at Stations 204 and 213 are utilized for rescues from trenches, mountains, swift water, canals, palm trees and window washing operations. He also reported that two units are presently equipped to respond to hazardous material incidents, and he noted that additional fuel and chemical tanker traffic as a result of freeway expansion could increase the possibility of a hazardous incident.

Chief Stubbs stated that three Battalion Chiefs currently serve the City, and he noted that realignment is required in the southeast part of the City. He advised that the Battalion Chiefs are responsible for monitoring training and activities at the stations, and that when two Battalion Chiefs are required to respond to a major incident, only one Battalion Chief is available to monitor the remainder of the City.

Chief Stubbs advised that a team was formed to study key deployment issues, including the four-minute response time goal, the number of times a unit is unavailable to respond to a call, the location of a second unit designated to respond as determined by the automatic vehicle locator (AVL) system, and the amount of time required for the second unit to arrive.

Addressing the subjects of future growth, infill and apparatus placement, Chief Stubbs stated that stations are required in both infill and eastern growth areas, and that a few stations in the City could accommodate a second unit. He also reported that the Real Estate Office is attempting to procure land that could be utilized as sites for future fire stations.

Discussion ensued relative to the fact the department has initiated an effort to obtain the services of an Arizona State University (ASU) intern to conduct research and provide assistance on various projects; that four future station sites have been purchased; that bond funds are not presently available to construct fire stations; that Quality of Life funds are available to construct one station; and that funds to build additional stations will be proposed in the 2006 bond election.

In response to a comment by Committeemember Griswold, Chief Stubbs noted that discussion in a Financing the Future Committee meeting addressed the practice of billing insurance companies when the "Jaws of Life" equipment is utilized. He advised that the department is presently seeking additional information on that practice.

Responding to a question from Chairman Whalen relative to the department's ability to utilize an existing building as a temporary fire station, Chief Stubbs advised that the necessary apparatus is available, but the department is presently unable to staff an additional station. He noted that a hospital scheduled for future closing may also provide space, and he added that the department could also consider utilizing a home that included an adjacent vacant lot.

Chairman Whalen thanked staff for the presentation.

3. Adjournment.

Without objection, the Fire Committee meeting adjourned at 4:26 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 18th day of April 2005. I further certify that the meeting was duly called and held and that a quorum was present.

BARBARA JONES, CITY CLERK

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