



FIRE COMMITTEE MINUTES

July 5, 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 July 5, 2005 at 3:02 p.m.

COMMITTEE PRESENT

Mike Whalen, Chairman
Rex Griswold
Janie Thom

COUNCIL PRESENT

None

OFFICERS PRESENT

Mike Hutchinson

Fire Chief Harry Beck thanked Committeemember Griswold for speaking at the recent recruit graduation ceremony. He also thanked Committeemember Thom for attending the event.

Chief Beck advised that staff was present to provide an update on recent Fire Department activities. (Staff displayed a PowerPoint presentation [see Attachment], which addressed each of the agenda items.)

1. Hear a report on the Fire Department's participation in a one-year hospital diversion pilot project.

Chief Beck introduced Deputy Chief Kenny King, who is responsible for the department's Emergency Medical Services (EMS) area, and he advised that Chief King, in cooperation with other Valley fire departments and East Valley hospitals, developed a new Hospital Diversion Plan to replace a program that has proved to be less functional in recent years.

Chief King provided a brief history of the prior plan that was in place for several years. He noted that as a result of population growth in the East Valley, attempts were made to divert emergency medical traffic away from hospitals experiencing an acute capacity crisis. Chief King stated that hospitals and pre-hospital providers determined that the system was no longer effective.

Chief King reported that meetings were held with representatives of the Tucson Fire Department and Tucson hospitals to obtain information on the "no diversion" plan that was successfully implemented by the City of Tucson several months ago. He advised that a subcommittee, comprised of representatives of East Valley hospitals and fire departments, was formed to address the issue and consider implementation of a similar "no diversion" plan. Chief King stated that the subcommittee developed a plan for a one-year pilot "no diversion" program, which provides for centralization of the decision making process for diversion and/or redistribution of emergency medical services. He noted that the plan was implemented as a pilot project on June 20th and will continue through June 19, 2006, and he added that the

subcommittee meets weekly to address any problems and monitor the status of the project. Chief King said that the program is operating smoothly. He explained that the Southwest Ambulance paging system provides information on how many ambulances are backed up at a certain hospital and how long the first ambulance has been there, which provides a good indication of the length of time a patient without a life-threatening condition may have to wait for medical attention at a particular facility.

Committeemember Griswold complimented staff for initiating a creative solution.

In response to a question from Committeemember Thom, Chief King reported that the hospitals are satisfied with the program to date. He noted that issues or problems are addressed at the weekly subcommittee meetings. Chief King advised that West Valley communities and other metropolitan areas are closely monitoring the East Valley pilot program.

Chief Beck expressed appreciation to the hospitals and to Southwest Ambulance for their cooperation and willingness to implement a new program.

Chairman Whalen suggested that information regarding the availability of service at hospital emergency rooms would be of benefit to the general public.

Chairman Whalen thanked staff for the presentation.

2. Hear a report on the Fire Department's Emergency Scene Rehabilitation program.

Chief Beck commented that fire fighting is one of the most dangerous professions. He noted that during the current year to date, more than 50 firefighters have perished in the line of duty nationwide, and that approximately 50 percent of the deaths were caused by heart attacks following emergency incidents. Chief Beck reported that the Mesa Fire Department recently participated in the national "Stand Down for Safety" Program sponsored by the International Association of Fire Chiefs to heighten awareness of the safety issues that often lead to heart attacks. He added that annual fitness testing is required for all Mesa firefighters. Chief Beck advised that firefighting in Mesa during the summer months is very strenuous as a result of the high temperatures. He explained that Mesa's Rehabilitation Program is a system that provides services to firefighters on the scene of an emergency incident and includes a medical assessment to ensure that firefighters are able to return to duty. Chief Beck stated that Deputy Chief Brady Leffler was present to provide information on the program.

Chief Leffler advised that firefighter safety and maintaining the firefighter's ability to perform his or her duties are priorities that benefit the firefighter, the City of Mesa and the citizens of Mesa. He noted that firefighters operate in an environment that does not allow their bodies to recover quickly, and that the stressful activity also increases the heart rate. Chief Leffler stated that the department has a truck that is specifically designed to address the rehabilitation, rehydration, and cooling of firefighters. He added that a physical assessment and a mental assessment, if necessary, could also be made in order to determine if the individual is prepared to return to service.

Chief Leffler stated that a rehabilitation sector is established on the scene of all working fires. He noted that rehabilitation efforts move into an ultra sensitive mode when the heat index reaches 105 degrees due to the fact that the extreme conditions shorten the length of time that firefighters are able to work. He added that an ambulance and an advanced life support unit are also in place at the scene, and that staff are present to determine when a firefighter is able to return to the incident.

Chief Leffler noted that the Rehabilitation Unit also provides assistance to the Police Department during certain events or activities.

In response to a question from Chairman Whalen, Chief Leffler advised that the Rehabilitation Unit is dispatched automatically to any working fire.

Discussion ensued relative to the fact that the Mesa Fire Department responds to an average of three or four fires per day; that the definition of a "working fire" is a situation where a crew is unable to determine whether the fire is completely out; that the life expectancy of the rehabilitation truck is quite long; and that the rehabilitation truck is utilized approximately 200 times per year.

Chairman Whalen thanked Chief Leffler for the presentation.

3. Hear a report on the Fire Department Succession Management activities.

Chief Beck stated that the department is in the process of implementing the Succession Management Plan, and that they have been working closely with the Human Resources Department to address this issue. He introduced Deputy Chief Jim Frye, who is responsible for managing the Fire Department's personnel function.

Chief Frye advised that prior to the inception of the Deferred Option Retirement Program (DROP) in 2001, it was difficult to predict when openings would occur. He noted that the purpose of the present practice is to anticipate the amount of training time required to certify a replacement and pre-hire the necessary employees. Chief Frye provided the following statistical information:

- 15% of sworn members (57 positions) are participating in the DROP Program.
- One-third (147 positions) of the Fire Department's members (civilian and sworn) will be eligible to retire at the end of 2006.
- 37% of the chief officers (9 positions) are in the DROP Program, and a total of 90% (22 positions) are presently eligible for retirement.
- 26 of the 97 fire captains (27%) are participating in the DROP Program.

Chief Frye added that members with specialized training who are participating in the DROP Program include 18 with aircraft rescue/firefighter certification, 12 paramedics, 5 with hazardous materials certification, and 4 technical rescue technicians. He stated that the staffing plan that is in place implements pro-active hiring in order to have the employee in place with the necessary certifications at the proper time. Chief Frye advised that "succession management" would address the replacement of the large number of captains who will be retiring by utilizing some of the following methods:

- Implementing temporary promotions.
- Mentoring current employees.
- Assigning an employee to “shadow” an incumbent.
- Assigning employees to special projects.

In response to a question from Chairman Whalen, Chief Beck advised that four or five pre-hires were made during the current year and he anticipates hiring eight individuals in the next budget year in order to offset the DROP Program participants.

Committeemember Griswold noted that an earlier Council discussion addressed a possible requirement that applicants be certified as paramedics, but he noted that the State of Arizona requires a “sponsoring agency” in order for an individual to enroll in paramedic training.

Chief Beck explained that the recruit training program was recently compressed from 16 weeks to 12 weeks, and that during the probationary year the employee will periodically attend classes that would have normally been provided during the other four weeks.

Committeemember Griswold noted that the increased number of promotional opportunities available in the Mesa Fire Department should be an excellent recruitment tool.

City Manager Mike Hutchinson stated that the Talent Assessment and Development (TAD) Program utilized by the Fire Department would be extended throughout the organization.

Chairman Whalen stated that the Police Department has successfully utilized some retired members in specialty positions, and he asked whether the Fire Department has considered a similar program.

Chief Beck advised that several retired firefighters are presently serving as volunteers in the department, and he noted that many individuals in the specialty positions are leaving to join other organizations. He added that efforts are being made to reclassify some of the civilian positions as sworn positions in order to expose these individuals to the administrative aspect of the department. Chief Beck noted that the department recently lost three individuals with medical training positions to other organizations.

Committeemember Griswold commented that a future partnership with Mesa Community College to provide the training may be a solution.

Chief Beck noted the future possibility of addressing the academic components of paramedic training through regular college courses, but he added that regulation of that issue is controlled by the State of Arizona.

Mr. Hutchinson advised that three Fire Department employees left on June 30th, and he added that the City of Scottsdale recently hired six or seven of Mesa’s Fire Department employees.

Responding to a question from Committeemember Thom, Chief Beck advised that Arizona State University (ASU) does not have a paramedic program. He added that ASU does have a Sports’ Medicine Program and a host of other technical medical training programs.

Chairman Whalen thanked Chief Beck and his staff for the presentations, and he apologized for the fact that vacation plans prevented him from attending the recent graduation ceremony. He also commended Chief Beck and his organization for their excellent performance.

4. Adjournment.

Without objection, the Fire Committee meeting adjourned at 3:52 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 5th day of July 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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Attachment