

Special City Commission Meeting

Mayor Stebbins presiding

CALL TO ORDER: 2:30 PM

ROLL CALL: City Commissioners present: Dona Stebbins, Bill Bronson, Bill Beecher, John Rosenbaum and Mary Jolley. Also present were the City Manager, Assistant City Manager, City Attorney, the Fire Chief, Police Chief and the City Clerk.

NEW BUSINESS

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY GRANT “STAFFING FOR ADEQUATE FIRE AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE” (SAFER).

Fire Chief Randy McCamley reported that last spring the Great Falls Fire Rescue applied for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant which is administered by the Department of Homeland Security. These grants are awarded through a competitive process with grants being awarded to communities from across the nation with the most urgent need to add front-line firefighters. The goal of these grants is to enhance the local fire departments' abilities to comply with staffing, response and operational standards established by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the Occupational Safety Health Administration (OSHA).

On January 14, 2009, the City of Great Falls received notification that it had been awarded over \$1.7 million dollars to help fund the hiring of 16 new firefighters. The award notice requires the City of Great Falls to complete an acceptance package that lets the Department of Homeland Security know that the City has accepted the terms of the grant and will begin the recruiting process.

Chief McCamley presented PowerPoint slides of diagrams, charts and graphs that compared the current City of Great Falls' staffing level versus industry standards; how rapidly fire progresses through the different phases with flashover occurring at 8 minutes; fire extension and the number of civilian deaths, injuries and dollar loss per fire; the importance of a quick interior fire attack to substantially reduce human and property losses; standard response for first alarm residential fires that effectively and safely protects the lives and safety of both firefighters and citizens.

Chief McCamley explained that increasing frontline staffing would improve citizen safety and service delivery; improve fire ground safety; help reduce property loss; provide budget savings on callbacks of off-duty firefighters during 2nd alarm fires; provide a cushion for minimum staffing levels without having to hire back as often; and, improve Insurance Services Office (ISO) fire classification for the community from 3 to 2.

The SAFER grant requires a long term financial commitment from the City. The federal grant amount decreases over four years and terminates in the fifth year. The grant provides funds to apply toward new fire fighter wages only. It does not apply toward benefits and other administrative costs. In addition to the cost of salaries and benefits, additional personal protective equipment will have to be purchased for the new recruits.

Chief McCamley reported that, although the Fire Department does generate revenue, the Commission will need to consider the grant's impact on the general fund. He reviewed charts that projected general fund revenues over the next five years, and highlighted new revenues generated by the Fire Department to help offset the City's match for the grant.

In addition, Chief McCamley projected a savings of \$80,000 per year for overtime if the SAFER grant was in place. He also explained that the possibility exists that a restructuring of the Fire Inspector duties may present itself in the current fiscal year which could provide another \$77,000 savings to be used to supplement the City's funding match.

In closing, Chief McCamley thanked the Commission for allowing him the opportunity to present this important request. The personnel at the Great Falls Fire Department understand that the timing of this budget request couldn't have come at a more challenging budget time. Chief McCamley believes that this rare funding opportunity will benefit the community and provide for safer working conditions for the firefighters. He urged the Commission's careful consideration of this matter.

Mayor Stebbins asked if there was any discussion amongst the Commissioners.

Commissioner Beecher inquired if there had been any effort to request a lesser matching requirement or an extension of the deadline from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Chief McCamley responded that those attempts were made as late as this afternoon. The point of contact responsible for the DHS grant understands the City's predicament, consulted with his headquarters and responded that no adjustments could be made to the grant. The grant was considered on the City's need for 16 firefighters. With regard to the deadline, tomorrow will be past the two week deadline. In fairness to the other applicants that may be able to benefit from this grant, DHS needs the City's answer or will consider other applicants.

City Manager Doyon requested clarification on the timeframe for implementation if the grant was accepted. Chief McCamley responded that no monies would be expended out of the remainder of this year's budget. The City will not be paying for these new positions until after the recruitment and hiring process at the end of June or first part of July. DHS reimburses quarterly after the fact.

Commissioner Beecher inquired what would happen if the City couldn't meet the total match in subsequent years. Chief McCamley responded that failure to comply with all aspects of the grant would result in forfeiting the balance of the grant and the City would have to pay back the grant payments up to that point.

Commissioner Bronson asked where the implication with OSHA was that was referred to in the agenda report. Chief McCamley answered that compliance with OSHA was referenced because that was the language of the grant. It is to bring communities toward compliance with NFPA as well as OSHA.

Commissioner Bronson inquired if GFFR could rely on the mutual aid agreements with MANG and MAFB one hundred percent of the time. Chief McCamley responded that GFFR has a long standing relationship with MANG and MAFB. Due to military call outs, MAFB has not been able to honor that commitment every time in the recent past. MANG has people available, but the distinction with the mutual aid agreement is that they will not show up at the fire within eight minutes. Most of the time they are called in as after forces to do the clean up or they back staff the station.

Commissioner Bronson inquired about the concern expressed in the agenda report regarding the department not being able to answer a recent call because all apparatus was already assigned to another emergency and, if the trend continued, more system failures would occur. Chief McCamley explained that overlapping calls are occurring with more frequency. The standard first alarm takes three quarters of the City's Fire Department dedicated to that call. That leaves one engine company for the remainder of the city. With the several thousand other public service calls and EMS calls going on, routinely that other fire engine is also out in the community leaving no one to respond. The incident referenced in the report happened on New Year's Eve.

Commissioner Bronson asked Chief McCamley to comment on how the current situation may be placing unnecessary or additional stress on the firefighting staff. Based on the current staffing levels, Commissioner Bronson asked if the Fire Department had situations in the past two to five years where this has been a major contributing factor to an accident or injury and, if so, is this something that could be avoided with increased staffing levels. Chief McCamley answered yes. He explained that a common factor between the number of firefighter deaths nationally was that there were generally less than 15 firefighters on the ground. There were also more injuries. Fires that burn today are hotter, the smoke is more toxic, and the situations are more dangerous than they were 20-30 years ago. Since he has been Chief, he explained that he has had to retire three firefighters that were severely injured on the fire ground or during rescues that were unable to return to work. More recently, a firefighter was burned. With the current staffing level, Chief McCamley believes his staff is getting the job done but they are risking more than what is necessary. Statistically, it is a matter of time before other accidents happen.

Commissioner Bronson discussed the statistics of call comparisons and staffing levels between 1969 and the present. There has been an increase in medical and hazmat calls. He asked Chief McCamley to comment on whether there were other considerations to look at since the number of fire calls has gone down. Chief McCamley answered from 1969 to the present, fires are down less than half across the nation. That was due to aggressive fire inspections, education efforts and improvements in the uniform fire and building codes. Today, there are OSHA requirements. Whether there are 100 or 300 fires per year, there is a need to have a standard deployment of resources on duty every day because there is no way to predict when or where the next fire will occur. Almost everything built today is built out of lightweight construction. It burns hotter, is more toxic and collapses in minutes. When things were built out of lumber, it afforded more time. When not at fires, his staff is busy attending several thousand emergency medical calls per year, or assisting the community with a variety of other services.

Commissioner Beecher commented that the service contract with SME is an assumption, and any increase in the general fund over the next four years will be absorbed to match the grant without any consideration to other department needs. The City Manager has asked the Commission to focus on budget priorities. An election is coming up in November. He feels strongly that a public safety levy should be put forth for the voters to consider. Having said all that, Commissioner Beecher asked what would happen if the Commission accepts the grant, the first firefighter is hired after the new budget year, but the voters don't support the public safety levy.

Mayor Stebbins responded that she has family members who are firefighters. She would not like to see them go through the situation that this City department is going through. There is a lot of stress involved, particularly being short handed. She believes the public will see the need for a public safety levy. She believes the public is cognizant of the hard work of this department and the fact that every day they go in harm's way.

Commissioner Bronson echoed Mayor Stebbins and commented he had an uncle that was a fire marshal who was injured firefighting and had to end his career. He understands the risks. The significant economic concern has to be weighed as part of the equation. He believes it is necessary for the public and private sectors to step up in hard times. He is willing to take the risk and believes the public will too once they fully understand all of the ramifications.

Commissioner Jolley asked if the fire service agreement was with SME or Southern Montana. Chief McCamley responded that he believes the entity is Southern Montana Electric G&T and, to his knowledge, the contract amount is \$23,000 per month for fire and rescue services.

Commissioner Jolley inquired about the Fire Inspector's position. Chief McCamley answered that the Fire Inspector has been on leave, and he is not sure at this point if he will be coming back to work. If the position is vacated, then he will ask the City Manager to reallocate that money back to the operations division.

Commissioner Jolley asked how many cities in Montana also have fire trucks responding to emergency medical calls. Chief McCamley responded, as far as he knew, they all do. Commissioner Jolley asked if it would be frowned upon if GFFR cut back on services after accepting the grant. Chief McCamley responded that the DHS is not concerned where the money comes from. They leave it up to the local officials to decide how to manage their money. Once the commitment is made and he returns the packet to accept the grant, the City is not on the hook until it starts spending the money. Once that happens, the spirit and intent of the contract needs to be followed.

Assistant Fiscal Services Director Melissa Kinzler commented that if the public voted in November to pass a public safety mill levy, the City wouldn't see that money until the next year.

Commissioner Rosenbaum discussed the timeline of the City budget process and a public safety mill levy. He suggested mailing out a special ballot in May.

Commissioner Bronson moved, seconded by Commissioner Beecher, that the City Commission accept the Department of Homeland Security grant and authorize the City Manager to hire 16 full-time firefighters using the SAFER grant money and also to appropriate matching funds as required by the City.

Mayor Stebbins asked if there were any inquiries from the public.

Neil Taylor, 3417 4th Avenue South, commended the Great Falls Fire Department. Mr. Taylor suggested the idea of volunteer firemen.

Ron Gessaman, 1006 36th Avenue NE, expressed concerns about the number of calls referenced in the agenda report, and the large percentage of emergency medical calls when there is a private ambulance service in Great Falls. He described an occasion on Tuesday where he saw an ambulance going west and about two miles further he met a fire truck also going west. He presumed they were both going to the same location and believes it was a wasted call for the Fire Department. He also believes that the fuel costs estimated in the agenda report to be too low. Mr. Gessaman does not believe, due to the current economic situation, that the voters will approve a public safety mill levy. If the public does not approve a public safety levy, the City's portion of the grant will eat up 100% of the general fund by the fifth year. Mr. Gessaman assumed that the public safety levy mentioned in the report was to match the SAFER grant,

and it does not cover the additional money for the Police Department. He also reminded the Commission that there have been requests from the Park and Recreation Department and the Animal Shelter. He is concerned about what will happen if the public does not approve a public safety levy, and how the money will be paid back.

Dave VanSon, 2404 1st Avenue North, thanked the City Commission for discussing this important issue. Mr. VanSon stated he was here as a citizen of Great Falls, a Captain of the GFFR, and President of Great Falls Firefighters Union. He is 100% in support of the SAFER grant. Mr. VanSon commented that there was public misconception regarding duplication of calls that he heard earlier. He clarified that every fire station has a paramedic on the engine. They are strategically located throughout the city to respond to the call quicker than the private ambulance service that has one location downtown. As the prior gentleman noticed he saw an ambulance and a fire truck going west, the fire department will be there prior to the ambulance and provide the essential medical services. Those services are not duplicated. They are enhanced by the Fire Department responding to those calls. Increasing the staffing levels is a need and not a want for the firefighters. Mr. VanSon encouraged the City Commission to approve the SAFER grant.

Motion carried 5-0.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Commission, **Commissioner Jolley moved, seconded by Commissioner Bronson, that the special meeting of January 28, 2009, be adjourned at 3:30 p.m.**

Motion carried 5-0.

Mayor Stebbins

City Clerk

Minutes Approved: February 2, 2009