

City of North College Hill

# Fire Task Force Recommendations



28<sup>th</sup> October 2020

## Overview

At the directive of the Mayor, the Fire Task Force was formed to examine ways to improve North College Hill Fire Department services, limit costs, and improve efficiency. This report includes a summary of the Fire Task Force's findings and recommendations to the Mayor and North College Hill City Council.

## Members

The Fire Task Force was composed of six members selected by the Mayor from the community; fire administration; organized labor and City Council.

Mike Graver, City Council (President)

Brian Fels, Fire Administration (Fire Chief)

Kyle Scales, Labor (North College Hill Firefighters Bargaining Unit, Local 2372)

Arika Underwood, City Council (Chair of Public Safety Committee)

Maureen Mason, Resident

Lauren Zapf, Resident (resigned due to personal matter)

## Summary of Fire Task Force's Work

The Fire Task Force held seven meetings from June 2020 to November 2020. In addition to full meetings, the task force also welcomed several guests; including Mayor Traci Nichols, City Administrator Ron Mosby and Deputy Fire Chiefs Ken Caldwell and Joe Placke and received presentations from Fire Chief Brian Fels and Finance Director Ari Hall. Each member of the task force was also provided with a binder containing reference materials to include but not limited to: budgets, collective bargaining agreements, job postings, wage ordinances and surveys, resolutions, policies and reports.

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## Summary of Fire Task Force's Findings

For many years the strategy of using part-time personnel and relying on mutual aid served many small fire departments very well. North College Hill has relied on that strategy to keep fire and emergency medical service costs reasonable. However in the past several years the strategy of mutual aid and employing part-time staff has encountered increasingly oppressive mutual aid demands and labor market obstacles.

While the cost savings from using part-time staff have helped control the cost of fire suppression and emergency medical services for small jurisdictions, this strategy has had a negative impact on the workforce over the last decade. As hourly rates for part-time firefighters are usually less than those full-time firefighters and the availability of full-time positions dwindling, fewer and fewer young people are entering the fire service. Many trade schools and colleges have difficulty filling classes with some removing fire and emergency medical training programs from their course offerings altogether. As a result, North College Hill has relied heavily on full-time firefighters from other jurisdictions to fill its ranks. Currently 75% of the part-time staff consists of full-time firefighters from other jurisdictions. Subsequently, overtime opportunities or mandates, training requirements and other scheduling conflicts frequently result in our department being inadequately staffed exposing our community and remaining first responders to increased risk as our already limited resources become delayed or unavailable.

Since the current four person, part-time staffing model was adopted in 2001 until current time, demand for emergency medical and fire service has increased by 152% making North College Hill one of the busiest stations in Hamilton County, resulting in increasing calls for mutual aid to partner agencies. Over the last decade North College Hill has explored various options to address concerns arising from increasing service demands and an inadequate staffing model. Options such as privatization, contracted services and most recently formation of a joint fire district have been vetted before city council and the community during this time.

Beginning in 2017, North College Hill began experiencing service refusals from mutual aid partners as a matter of official policy resulting from the burgeoning increase in emergency service demand areawide. Mutual aid partners now routinely refuse requests for mutual aid assistance because they also find themselves short staffed, their crews fully deployed or in situations where a response would leave their respective communities short of available emergency resources. As a result, there continue to be delays in emergency medical response, and suboptimal outcomes that could have been prevented by a timely response.

The Fire Department has a budget of approximately \$1,250,000, provided by a 3.2 mil property tax levy (approved in November 2017), emergency medical billing and an allocation from the city's

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general fund. A review of current revenue sources with Finance Director, Ari Hall as well as consultation with City Administrator, Ron Mosby revealed that current economic realities and resultant lack of growth in general fund revenues over the past decade have negatively impacted all city services, particularly public safety services which represent the largest portions of the general fund expenses. Further, that not only are there no available funds to address the issues identified by the Fire Task Force but additionally that the funding necessary to maintain current operations is becoming increasingly at risk.

North College Hill is not alone as many mutual aid agencies find themselves in similar circumstances with increasing emergency medical and fire service demands taxing resources and limiting their ability to provide service outside of their home jurisdiction. Mt Healthy Fire Department, who found themselves experiencing similar issues, recently sought and obtained voter approval for adding 12.5 mils to their existing 5 mil permanent fire levy (17.5 total mils). Both Colerain and Springfield Township Fire Departments are following suit this November with Colerain seeking an additional 3.0 mils to their existing 12.5 and Springfield adding 2.5 mils to their existing 8.5.

## **Goals**

1. Ensure an adequately and professionally staffed fire department that can handle the anticipated service needs of the community.
2. Reduce reliance on part-time personnel and mutual aid.
3. Address capital vehicle, equipment and building needs.
4. Address personnel recruitment and retention issues.
5. Reduce the fire department's burden on the city's general fund.

## **Recommendations**

The Fire Task Force examined a number of options to accomplish these goals, unanimously settling on a twelve (12) mil, five (5) year replacement fire levy generating approximately 1,330,000 annually. With this level of funding the following can be achieved:

1. Increase daily staffing from 4 to 5 per day (3 Full-Time/2 Part-Time)
2. Increase the number of full-time FF's from 3 to 9
3. Provide the capital funding necessary to address replacement of the 1994 fire engine, building repairs as well as many other smaller ticket capital needs
4. Offer employee compensation for both full and part-time personnel that is competitive
5. Reduce fire department's general fund need by approximately \$100K annually

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The Fire Task Force determined that in order to provide the highest quality of service and provide for the health and safety of all the residents that this level of funding, while a significant increase to the existing levy, was absolutely essential to meet current and anticipated service demands for the duration of the levy term. It will provide an adequate number of dedicated, highly trained and motivated emergency personnel who will be ready to respond to any emergency situation immediately, saving lives and minimizing property damage.

## **Milestones**

### **Legislation**

November 2020 - RESOLUTION of Necessity adopted by the Taxing Authority and certified to County Auditor

December 2020 - CERTIFICATION by the County Auditor

March 2020 - RESOLUTION to Proceed of the Taxing Authority

### **Public Information**

TBA