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## MEMORANDUM

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TO: Mayor Walker and Councilors  
FROM: R Lawrence, Fire Chief  
M McPherson, City Administrator  
SUBJECT: **Request for ¾ Time Fire Chief**  
DATE: November 8, 2022

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### **Fire Department Staffing Trends**

In recent years, fire departments have experienced increased difficulty in finding and filling on-call firefighter positions. Since 1984, across the nation, the number of volunteer firefighters has dropped 17%. (National Volunteer Fire Council) It was recently announced that the Bloomington Fire Department with a roster of 150 volunteer firefighters has 51 vacant positions. They are now having to hire 18 full-time firefighters to provide service to their community. As volunteers decline, responsibilities are relegated to leadership/administration.

Neighboring cities that have transitioned to a full-time Fire Chief are:

- Cambridge
- Elk River
- East Bethel
- Isanti
- St. Francis
- Zimmerman

Some of these include an Emergency Manager's responsibilities, but none include the R.E.P responsibilities.

### **Demands on the Fire Department**

In addition to fire suppression, a fire department is also called upon to complete the following activities:

- Requests for inspections
- New construction review and inspection for State Fire Code requirements
- Respond to Fire Code complaints
- Investigate fire cause and origin
- Human resources duties
- General Administration

Activities in addition to the above that are specific to the Princeton Fire and Rescue Department include:

- Requests from the townships within the fire service district: wedding barns, inquiries from businesses outside the City for guidance regarding occupancy levels (COVID) or evacuation plan requirements, etc.

- More community trainings: Active Shooter/Intruder, Fire Safety for the elderly
- Inter-agency collaboration: DNR, State Fire Marshal's Office, Monthly/Quarterly Chief's meetings
- Grant and Donation solicitation to off-set department costs
- Emergency Management responsibilities
- R.E.P. Program responsibilities
- Responding to daytime requests for service (medical, fire, other)

With a part-time (55%) Chief, there is a need to prioritize and balance the various activities noted above. Some activities like a regular fire inspection program do not get off the ground.

### **Budgetary Impacts of a ¾ Time Fire Chief**

As with many of our neighboring cities, it is likely that the City will require a full-time Fire Chief and possibly additional full-time staff in the future if volunteer firefighters, especially daytime responders become difficult to recruit.

Transitioning to a full-time Fire Chief in phases allows the City to absorb the budget impacts over time.

An increase to ¾ time adds eight (8) hours per week to the current hours worked. The increase amounts to an additional \$17,047.68, calculated thusly:

2023 wage per hour: \$40.98.  
8 x \$40.98 = \$327.84, weekly increase  
\$327.84 x 52 = \$17,047.68 annual increase  
\$17,047.68 / 2 = \$8,523.84.

As the R.E.P. program pays for fifty (50) percent of the Chief's salary, the impact to the General Fund and therefore the levy is \$8,523.84 for 2023. The incumbent Chief does not require the City's health insurance, which is a savings of \$19,818.72 for 2023, assuming family coverage of the HSA Value Plan.

### **Budgetary Off-sets**

There are a number of potential expense off-sets that have been identified which would further reduce Department expenditures to help absorb the requested increase in hours.

1. Implementing Departmental in-house training for EMR/EMT. This would save the Department approximately \$1,300.00 per year. There is also the opportunity for the Police Department to save some money as they would be able to participate in the yearly training to meet their medical training requirements. There is also a possibility of allowing neighboring departments to attend our refresher classes and charging them a fee for their firefighters.
2. Fire Chief responding to calls during the day that do not need a compliment of firefighters. These calls would be medicals, CO calls, or Fire Alarms calls with no fire or smoke showing. So far this year, the Department has responded to approximately 80 medical calls between the hours of 9am and 3pm. If the Chief was in town and responded to 50 of these calls, it could save approximately \$4,800.00. The rough calculation is:

8 firefighters @ \$12.00/hour = \$96.00  
\$96.00 x 50 calls = \$4,800.00

This takes some of the response burden off the firefighters. Except for one year, the call volume has increased every year in the last six years.

3. Increase in water sales for pools and ice rinks. In 2022, there has been over \$10,000.00 in water sales and this will likely increase going forward.

### **Future Considerations and Department Changes**

Going forward, there are a number of items to consider:

1. Loss of Daytime Responders. This issue is two-fold; first, there are current firefighters expected to retire in 2023 and as a result the daytime responder pool will likely be reduced from eight (8) to four (4), second there is the potential that local businesses will not be able to afford to have employees leave their shift during the day. As of now, no business has indicated a refusal to allow employees to respond but it could become an issue in the future.
2. Increased Department Professionalism. The incumbent Chief is working with staff to move away from elected to appointed Captains. This process will require the development of job descriptions and job duties beyond what is currently in the Department's Handbook as well as policies and procedures for ranking and interviewing candidates.
3. Cross-training of Administrative Duties. Currently, the Assistant Chief completes much of the incident reporting and payroll calculations. These are responsibilities that the Chief should be able to complete.
4. Creation and Implementation of a Fire Inspection Program for Businesses and Rental Properties. Fire inspections (fire extinguisher checks, evacuation maps, smoke detectors, egress windows, clear zones in storage areas) of business and rental properties on an annual or biennial basis. Completion of these inspections helps prevent fires before they occur or prevent the loss of life in the event one does occur. According to FEMA, 40% of businesses never reopen their doors after a disaster. This is a tax loss to the city and a loss of employment. It is possible that this program could have a small fee attached to it.
5. Evaluation of Daytime Response Options. Options for daytime responses need to be explored as volunteer recruits who can respond during business hours will likely continue to decrease as have been experienced by other departments. One option has been identified above, other options include duty crews or additional full or part-time staff.
6. Establishment of Fire Chief Office Hours. In order to address many of the noted considerations, there will be a need to establish a more consistent set of office hours for the Chief. This may require evaluating who provides some of the services currently covered by the Chief as there may be budgetary impacts to a different division of duties.

### **Request**

In 2022, staff proposed moving to a full-time Fire Chief. That request was rescinded in light of the need for a Technology Services Manager and interns in Finance and Community Development. In 2023, the request has been scaled back to add eight (8) additional hours per week to the position making the position ¾ time.