



CITY OF TOPEKA FIRE COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES

Date: February 18, 2021

Time: 6:00 pm

Location: Virtual

Commissioners

present:

CM Sylvia Ortiz

CM C Valdivia-Alcala

Chief Craig Duke

Fire Lt. Aaron Freeman

Captain Jason Broadbent

City Manager Brent Trout

Sandra Clear

Pablo Martinez

David King

Christopher Sullivan

Errin Mahan

Commissioners absent:

CM Lesser

Sandra Clear, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order.

Brent Trout, City Manager, reported discussion would focus on fire station equipment, Fire Department personnel and incident response time.

Fire Station Locations (Current and Proposed), Response Times and Impact

Craig Duke, Topeka Fire Chief, reported on the travel-time analysis for current fire stations; proposed fire station locations (N. Topeka Boulevard and NW 6th Street); and fire station relocations (excluding stations 1 and 11; and including proposed stations) with the goal to achieve equal fire station coverage throughout the city based on a 240-second (5-minute and 30-second travel time) to 90% of the incidents. Proposed fire station relocations include the following locations:

- N. Topeka Boulevard
- SW Governors Place and SW 6th Street
- NE Seward Avenue and NE Golden Avenue; and
- SW Topeka Boulevard and I-470.

Councilmember Ortiz stated she would like to clarify that a fire station building was not located at SW 6th Street, only the property purchased by the City.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala expressed concern with rushing the process. She stated the Commission has received a large amount of information in the last 2-3 days, specifically related to the relocation of fire stations in District 2, which needs further review and explanation. She referenced the industry hazards study not yet completed prior to the Commission completing their task and making recommendations.

City Manager Trout stated the Commission has no obligation to make any decisions at this time and it was not the intent of Staff to rush the process, only to present the information and ideas of what Staff believes would result in improved response times for the community as a whole. He reported the only new fire station (Station 11) proposed in the first phase, would potentially be built on SW 6th Street and Fairlawn Avenue and Station 1 would be moved to N. Topeka Boulevard.

Budgetary Impact of Number of Stations

City Manager Trout provided a brief summary of needed repairs on various fire stations as reported by Fire Department personnel and City Facilities Staff and noted they utilize FIRM Program funding on an annual basis to make the repairs with the intent to conduct a major renovation every 2-3 years on one of the fire stations.

Sandra Clear expressed the importance of making the necessary improvements on all the fire stations before the buildings fall into further disrepair.

Christopher Sullivan questioned the feasibility of implementing a Nurse Navigation program in order to save funding and reallocate those savings into the Fire Department operating budget.

Richard Sigle, Chief of EMS Topeka Fire Department, reported the Nurse Navigation program would be part of the overall conversation moving forward; however, the program is in the beginning stages with many moving parts to consider.

Sandra Clear asked how much a new fire station would cost.

City Manager Trout stated a new fire station would cost approximately \$8 million to construct in addition to the cost of apparatus.

Sandra Clear summarized that it would cost approximately \$16 million to build two (2) new fire stations and \$1.3 million annually for personnel.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala questioned the decrease in the number of fire fighters and apparatus that would be serving North Topeka due to the relocation of fire stations.

City Manager Trout confirmed the number of fire fighters and apparatus would decrease in North Topeka; however, the coverage would not change, as the new fire station located on SW 6th Street would service the western portion of District 2.

Future Fire Apparatus Needs and Cost

Topeka Fire Chief Duke provided a summary of the cost of the front-line apparatus, reserve apparatus and the Topeka Fire Department Apparatus Replacement Program, noting apparatus replacement occurs every 10-12 years or if the mileage exceeds 100,000.

Christopher Sullivan questioned why the list did not include ambulance (AMR) type vehicles as the Topeka Fire Department continues to move towards the implementation of an ALS program. He also

questioned how the City plans to fund the overall ALS program with an already strained budget and noted the City does not currently pay for services provided by AMR.

Fire Chief Duke clarified they are working to implement ALS services throughout the community; however, those services do not include a transport unit, noting they are considering alternative vehicles such as SUVs to respond to those types of service calls.

Lt. Darrin Plank, Topeka Fire Department, reported Fire personnel routinely have to wait for AMR to arrive on the incident scene to transport patients. He stated he concurs with Chief Duke and believes it was time for the City to consider implementing Basic Life Support (BLS) transporting services as it would benefit all citizens of the city.

Fire Chief Duke reported AMR, a for-profit company, receives \$300,000 annually in subsidized tax dollars.

Sandra Clear inquired on equipment and apparatus replacement over the next 5 years.

Fire Chief Duke reported two fire engines, two fire trucks and one aerial truck will need to be replaced totaling approximately \$4 million in replacement costs.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala referenced the cycle of the economy and the anticipation of a recession. She encouraged Staff to make all needed repairs to existing fire stations, purchase needed apparatus, and research progressive ways to deal with service calls instead of building two new fire stations at the cost of \$16 million while focusing investments on new equipment and basic item needs. She expressed concern with the impact the railroad crossing will have on response times in North Topeka while response vehicles are traveling on NW Lyman Road, noting the train runs every 30 minutes.

Councilmember Ortiz expanded on the history of constructing a fire station on SW 6th Street. She expressed the importance of implementing a plan and moving forward with it. She spoke in opposition of moving Station 6 several blocks and noted it would cause response times to run over 4 minutes and as high as 8 minutes for some locations west of the city in District 9.

Sandra Clear stated she concurs with comments made by Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala. She expressed the importance of moving forward with a plan that will be significantly beneficial in the long-term.

Councilmember Ortiz expressed the importance of having a plan in place and cautioned against using funds to renovate fire stations that could potentially close in the future.

Personnel Costs per Firefighter/Staffing Levels

City Manager Trout reported it would cost \$1.3 million annually to fund one apparatus, four fire fighters per shift for a total of 12 fire fighters, and applicable gear. He stated in terms of staffing, they have seven new academy graduates; 11-12 vacancies and they are in the process of scheduling an academy for 10 individuals in March 2021 along with another academy by the end of 2021 - potentially filling all

vacancies depending on the number of retirements in June 2021. He noted staffing level is better than it has been in a while and he believes the Fire Department continues to move in the right direction as it relates to overall staffing levels.

Fire Lt. Aaron Freeman stated he concurs with the staffing numbers reported by City Manager Trout.

Recruitment Current and Future

City Manager Trout reported the entry-level age requirement was lowered from 21 to 20 years of age, noting it remains challenging to recruit people that meet all the qualifications.

Fire Chief Duke stated the City of Topeka continues to have struggles like all cities across the nation, noting at this time, public safety employment seems to be less desirable to young adults.

Sandra Clear asked the Commission what option they preferred in regards to the relocation and/or building of new fire stations.

Councilmember Ortiz spoke in support of keeping fire stations 1 and 11 in their existing locations and building a new fire station at SW 6th and Fairlawn.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala spoke in support of leaving the Oakland fire station in the same location, build a new fire station at NW 6th Street, and use any remaining funds for the purchase of new apparatus and equipment.

David King spoke in support of building two new fire stations improving response time for the northwestern area of the city.

Christopher Sullivan stated he would agree with Mr. King if it would work for his neighborhood. He noted he only has received statistics, not solid solutions and remains open to any positive ideas from other Commissioners or Staff that would benefit his neighborhood. He expressed concern with the financial feasibility of building new fire stations due to the high cost.

Fire Lt. Freeman reported if fire stations 1 and 11 remain in existing locations and a new fire station is located at SW 6th Street and Fairlawn Avenue, all response times would remain the same except for the northwestern area of the city, where response times would increase. He stated the new fire station would require the purchase of one additional engine company (apparatus) and 12 additional employees to staff the company. He noted by doing so, it would cover Mr. Sullivan's neighborhood, better serve citizens located on the south side of the Kansas River, and avoid building two fire stations simultaneously which would reduce coverage on the north side of Topeka.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala asked if they have considered recruiting outside the Topeka-Shawnee County area, including communities of color. She expressed the importance of making certain fire stations 1 and 11 remain fully staffed at all times, to keep the service level at an appropriate level.

Fire Lt. Freeman stated they recruit outside of the Topeka-Shawnee County, including several community colleges. He noted it would be a policy decision of the Governing Body to make sure funding is in place for all fire stations to remain fully staffed at all times.

Sandra Clear asked the Commission to comment on if they want the Fire Department operating budget to remain the same and expenses reduced to accommodate the expense of a new fire station or keep the tax levy the same.

David King stated he believes they should recommend a solid plan that ensures adequate funding for the Fire Department to provide services that protect the citizens of Topeka, not just a set amount of money. He spoke in support of increasing the tax levy if necessary.

Sandra Clear spoke in support of increasing the tax levy in order to support growth and make it possible to fund the items needed for adequate fire service in Topeka. She questioned how repairs would be funded for existing fire stations as well as how quickly those repairs will be completed.

City Manager Trout reported one mill would cover the cost of the \$1.3 million needed on an annual basis to cover personnel costs based on the current tax valuation. He noted the mill levy has not been increased in seven years, and the cost of repairs would be bonded according to the improvement plan in place for the fire stations.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala stated she would have to leave the meeting at 7:30 p.m.; however, she would support further dialog of increasing the tax levy because it would support public health and safety.

City Manager Trout reported there have been conversations regarding the implementation of sales tax for funding Fire Department needs.

Councilmember Ortiz asked if there were funds set aside for fire station 13 that would be available for use.

City Manager Trout reported the funding authorization for Fire Station 13 has expired.

Christopher Sullivan stated he believes there would be more support from citizens if the sales tax initiative was referred to as a public safety tax.

City Manager Trout announced the Commission would discuss and formulate their recommendations to present to the Governing Body at the March 18, 2021, Fire Commission meeting.

Sandra Clear requested that City Manager Trout comprise a list of recommendations needed from the Commission and distribute it to them prior to the March 18, 2021, meeting. She suggested Commission members reserve March 25, 2021, in case they need to schedule another meeting to finalize the Governing Body report due on April 6, 2021. She suggested public input be gathered at the Governing Body level.

City Manager Trout confirmed he would distribute a list of questions for the Commission to consider prior to the March 18, 2021, Fire Commission Meeting. He suggested public input be submitted via email at citymanager@topeka.org.

Sandra Clear adjourned the meeting at 7:36 pm.