



CITY OF TOPEKA FIRE COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES

Date: December 17, 2020

Time: 6:00 pm

Location: Virtual

Commissioners present:

CM Sylvia Ortiz

CM C Valdivia-Alcala

Chief Craig Duke

Captain Jason Broadbent

City Manager Brent Trout

Deputy Chief Ty Christian

Sandra Clear

Pablo Martinez

David King

Christopher Sullivan

CM Mike Lesser

Commissioners absent:

Sandra Clear, Co-chair, called the meeting to order. Ms. Clear read the motion made by Council regarding the formation of the Commission and asked if City Council members or the City Manager could clarify the focus and mission of the Commission.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala responded that her understanding was that the initial purpose was to review issues discussed at Council meetings regarding station closures and the purchasing of property on SW 6th for a station. However, she believes the scope has now broadened.

City Manager Trout responded that the issue had started with the location of fire stations, but had broadened to a discussion of what type of fire service the Commission feels is best for our community and a strategic master plan. This committee would establish a framework and staff would create the master plan.

Ms. Clear stated that the strategic plan was updated and extends to 2022 but perhaps it needs more detail. Ms. Clear asked that a copy be provided to the Commission. Chief Duke responded that it would be provided.

Ms. Clear commented that she had reviewed the study compiled by Chief Wayne and that it seemed to answer many of the questions the Commission was addressing.

City Manager Trout stated that he noticed two studies were missing from the links sent and that those needed to be provided to the Commission.

Councilwoman Ortiz stated that the Commission needed to look at all studies and asked that all players be at the table – Union, Firefighters, Community, Staff, Council – to decide on the recommendation to Council.

It was discussed that every study discusses the same basic topics and every study has something to offer. However, the population concentrations of the City have changed and the composition of some areas so we need to consider those points.

1. Review and Discussion of Past Studies

Fire Chief Duke noted that the two most relevant studies are the ESCI, February, 2016 (most up to date), and Fire Chief Tim Wayne's study (information from firefighter perspective). Fire Chief Duke stated that we need to focus on how the City will move forward and at what pace, allocating resources and manpower to best serve the community as a whole.

Councilman Lesser stated that we should pick a study to use as a guide, break it down by topic and look at the most recent statistics.

2. Prevention vs Suppression policies, Inspections, Investigations

City Manager Trout stated that one topic for discussion is to decide how much the City should invest in prevention vs suppression.

Fire Marshall Todd Harrison presented a power point outlining Fire Prevention, Public Education, Inspections, and Fire Investigations.

Questions:

Mr. Sullivan - What areas would you say have the least adequate fire suppression systems?

Fire Marshall Harrison responded that most likely it would be a lot of the older downtown businesses but for a definitive answer that information would have to be gathered.

Mr. Sullivan – Would you say Oakland, North Topeka, Downtown?

Fire Marshall Harrison – Yes, and East Topeka.

Mr. Sullivan – If a Fire Department closes, would that affect insurance rates of businesses?

Councilman Lesser responded – No, it has no effect on rates.

3. Dispatching Process

Melanie Berger, Director of Communications, gave an overview of the Dispatch Process including what happens when a call comes in and a new enhancement software, Priority Dispatch. This software can be developed to provide more information to responders and that in turn will help with more efficient resource allocation and allow the department to update their response plans. The software provides structured call taking, consistent information, higher accuracy, and higher confidence. It will allow the department to modify call types and be more specific in their assistance.

Questions:

Ms. Clear – How will it decrease response times?

Ms. Berger responded that dispatchers will be able to ask questions in the right order, enter information immediately, and upgrade location information.

Ms. Clear – When will it be implemented?

Ms. Berger responded - Now. However, it will be more robust in 2021. The Fire Department has been operating the same system since 1997. This software development will help the department compose new response plans.

4. Equipment Sent for Call Types

Chief of Training, Kevin Flory spoke to the Commission regarding the type of equipment sent for each type of call, call types, and apparatus types. The current system assumes every fire engine is available and at its station.

Questions:

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala – Once a call type is determined, where is the hub that decides who/what goes where?

Response from Chief Flory – This is determined at dispatch. It is computer automated based on the data entered.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala – What is the difference between an engine and a truck?

Response from Chief Flory - An engine company has the pump, water tank, and hoses. The truck company is basically a rolling tool box.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala – What goes to a structure fire? Is the response the same regardless of building size?

Response from Chief Flory - This is determined from the data entered by dispatch. There is a prebuilt response in the system determining what equipment to send.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala – Are we lacking upgrades in comparison to other cities? Is the system antiquated?

Response from Chief Flory – No. However, the call types need to be updated. The new software will allow us to change that.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala – Explain Structural/Residential alarms.

Response from Chief Flory - Residential alarms are the automated alarms. In the case of structural alarms, an actual fire has been seen and reported.

Mr. Martinez – Not all equipment comes from the same station? What if a fire happens in the area where the truck is gone?

Response from Chief Flory – The system can see who is available.

Mr. Martinez - Can you call people off once you assess the situation?

Response from Chief Flory – Yes.

5. Medical vs Fire Call Volumes

Training Officer Alan Stahl, Topeka Fire, explained the classifications of calls.

Questions:

Ms. Clear - Do we charge for false calls?

Response – Beginning in January, callers will be charged after three false calls.

6. 2020 Station Shutdowns/Response Times

Fire Chief Duke presented the report.

Questions:

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala - How many days in 2020 was Station 1 closed?

Response from Fire Chief Duke- Not 100. From January 1 – April 5, there were no issues.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala - How is it determined which station is closed? How many calls would have been taken if they were open?

Response from Fire Chief Duke - No other stations were impacted. There are three other stations that calls went to. It operates just like back up when engines are out. The time for response is below average. The decision on which station to close is determined by which closing will have the least impact on rest of city.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala - Were there any major fires while the station was closed?

Response from Fire Chief Duke – There were two fires that were insignificant. The response times were 3:20 and 3:54 by Engine 3.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala commented that she would like to see more information. Fire Chief Duke responded that he has a large spreadsheet that he will send.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala – Do we have a breakdown of potential hazards in different areas of Topeka, a hazard risk assessment?

Fire Chief Duke responded that they are planning to do a risk assessment for all of Topeka.

Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala responded that she wants to be sure all hazardous conditions are considered when closing stations.

Chief of Operations Ty Christian gave a presentation on how TFD decides who is closing. Statistics considered are staffing levels and what it takes to keep everyone open. If there are staffing shortages, TFD does call backs.

Ms. Clear - Do you call back every time you are short? Response - Yes.

City Manager Trout clarified that one cost saving implemented during Covid19 was to eliminate call backs to avoid overtime. Stations were closed instead. Currently, TFD has gone back to call backs to be sure every station is staffed.

Councilwoman Ortiz – Firefighters have to put in for time off in January for the whole year. Can they cancel vacation and go in, especially during Covid? Could the City be reimbursed for call backs during Covid?

Response from Chief Christian – Vacation can be cancelled, but the opportunity to reschedule may be difficult, and due to vacation hour accumulation limits, firefighters could lose vacation hours. However, during Covid19, the limitations for using vacation hours have been extended. We cannot be reimbursed for call backs. If a station was closed because of a Covid infection, we called back to fill those shifts. We don't see that we will be in that difficult situation again to avoid call backs.

TFD currently has five vacancies on every shift. Seven firefighters are coming from the current academy and there is another academy in March. By the end of next year, TFD should not have any vacancies. The Council approved full staffing of TFD.

Mr. Huber - Have we considered moving the age from twenty-one to twenty to be competitive with other departments? Fire Chief Duke responded that it has been researched. One concern is the insurability to drive the equipment, but that could be made part of the negotiations with the Union. Applicants could be brought in at age eighteen and not allowed to drive.

City Manager Trout responded that he would clarify with the City's new insurer. Councilman Lesser responded that insuring drivers ages 19- 20 was not an issue with carriers he represents. Mr. Sullivan responded that if we don't look at 18 year olds, they will leave for other departments and not come back. We should have an apprenticeship letting them learn and feel a part of the system.

7. General Discussion

Questions from Ms. Clear:

Do we want a fire service that also handles medical calls? Majority replied yes.

Would you prefer a Sport Utility Vehicle or Fire Apparatus response for medical calls? Response was mixed. Further discussion needed.

Should we send two employees on a medical call so that if a fire call comes in, fire can still respond and medical could join them? Councilwoman Valdivia-Alcala responded that the decision was out of our paygrade.

Ms. Clear will email questions for discussion at the beginning of the next meeting.

Mr. King responded that he would prefer that the Commission focus on response times, best practices, and station placement. Ms. Clear responded that these are questions posed by the Council.

Councilman Lesser commented that the current call breakdown is 80% medical and 20 % fire calls. How can we look at that and change the possibility of how we do things?

Councilwoman Ortiz commented that we need more information from both sides and that the new call center will help.

Mr. Sullivan asked how AMR is tied in. Is there a reason they aren't embedded in our system? Jon Antrim responded that dispatch determines the response but that the services are very integrated and relay information to each other.

Next Meeting

Thursday, January 21, 2021, 6:00 pm. (Virtual Online)