

Finance Committee Questions
With Responses from Town Administration

2-24-2020

Fire/Rescue Department FY2021 Operating Budget and Article 14 - Hire Eight
Additional Firefighters

NOTE: Additional information and data can be found in a report prepared by the McGrath Consulting Group dated February 10, 2020. The report can be found on the Town website www.falmouthma.gov.

1) General Questions:

1. What is the long-term strategic plan for the fire department? (How many stations? All fire and ambulance stations? Is the number of calls expected to continue to increase indefinitely or will it plateau? Are the number of fires expected to increase, decrease or remain the same?)

Fire Department assesses needs annually based on call loading. Consultant report will be presented to Selectmen and utilized by the citizens advisory committee to recommend a new fire station location.

2. The town has added seven new firefighter positions in the last several years and 10 more positions are proposed. Is there any precedence for such a dramatic increase in any department in Falmouth?

The increase in Fire Department positions is a response to the increase in call volume the Town has experienced in recent years.

3. Does the request to increase staffing by 17 positions over the last five years indicate that Falmouth was previously understaffed? Or that, in the future service will be that much improved? Or something else entirely?

The number of calls has steadily grown over the past five years and the increase in staff prior to the proposed override is in direct response to the increase in calls. The override would add 8 firefighter/EMT/paramedics to improve response times in West Falmouth and the entire Town.

4. Why, if the vast majority of calls are for ambulances, do we need more fire fighters or would EMTs or Paramedics be the better choice? Is there a cost savings for not having dual-trained personnel?

Every Falmouth firefighter is also an EMT or paramedic now and that will continue in the future. There is no cost savings to be achieved by failing to have dual trained personnel.

5. Is it true that retaining firefighters has been an issue in Falmouth? How many firefighters have moved from Falmouth to other nearby towns in the last five years?

There has been a higher rate of staff turnover in the past few years than we have had historically due to a combination of transfers and retirements. Three firefighters have left Falmouth to work at other fire departments on the Cape and Islands. An additional 8 firefighters left to work in other eastern Massachusetts fire departments.

6. How does the promotion of four current firefighters to the rank of Fire Lieutenant change the efficiency of the Falmouth Fire Department?

Increased supervision is needed to keep pace with the increase in the number of firefighter/EMT/paramedics on shift. Promotion of four current firefighters will improve the safety and efficiency of the department. Promoting 4 firefighters to lieutenants does not reduce the number of personnel responding to calls. Lieutenants will respond to fire and EMS calls as do current lieutenants.

7. What are the safety standards for the number of ambulances per population/housing units/ area? Are we in-line, above or below those standards?

There are no such standards to our knowledge.

8. What are the national and/or state safety standards for response times? And how does Falmouth compare?

Our effective response times are going to improve with an increase in staffing at the start of shift from a minimum of 10 before 7/2020 to a minimum of 14 after 7/2020. There is no national response time requirement. There are two sets of NFPA "standards" which are guidelines only: one for areas served by professional firefighter/EMT/paramedics; and another for those served by volunteers. We found the following data in a study published in the Journal of American Medical Association (10/2017):

- *Urban areas average EMS response time 7 minutes*
- *Suburban average EMS response time 7.7 minutes*
- *Rural average EMS response time 14.5 minutes*

The NFPA "standard" (guideline) calls for arrival on the scene within 6 minutes. Most municipalities do not meet this standard. Falmouth's average response time for calendar 2019 was 7.9 minutes.

9. Is it accurate to say that there has been a large increase in false alarms? If so, what is being done about it?

There has been a slight increase in false fire alarms. This is attributed to an increase in the number of properties that have alarm systems and there are provisions in place to bill for repeated false alarms. There has also been an increase in "false" and unintentional medical

alarm activations which we are unable to quantify and for which there is no clear solution.

10. On what basis does the Fire Chief believe 18 firefighters at the beginning at each shift is optimal?

It is not helpful or meaningful to identify an optimal number that is beyond available financial resources. There will be at least 14 firefighters on duty at the start of shift effective 7/2020 without an override. With an override, there will typically be 16 firefighters at the start of shift.

11. What is the optimal number of positions for 4 fire stations?

It is not helpful or meaningful to identify an optimal number that is beyond available financial resources. The Town is pursuing a new fire station with a plan to operate 5 stations consistent with the recent consultants' recommendation.

12. What is the optimal number of positions for 5 fire stations?

It is not helpful or meaningful to identify an optimal number that is beyond available financial resources. To effectively operate the existing 5 stations, we are seeking a minimum of 16 FFs at the start of shift. The ultimate locations of the five fire stations as well as call loading will determine future staffing needs.

13. What is the optimal number of positions for 6 fire stations?

We have not evaluated 6 station scenarios.

14. Would it be helpful to hire an outside consultant to help determine the optimal staffing for the town?

We have full confidence in Chief Small and his command staff using their extensive training and experience in public safety to guide our decisions.

15. What is the current status of our ambulances? Years in service, expected replacement date etc.?

- *The ambulances from model years 2019, 2015, 2009 are in good condition;*
- *The ambulances from model years 2007 and 2003 are to be replaced with two new ambulances due for delivery within 60 days;*

16. What is the current status of the fire engines? Years in service, expected replacement date etc.?

- *Two 2009 pumpers, one 2016 pumper, one 2018 pumper;*
- *One 1995 pumper scheduled for replacement next year;*
- *The 1991 ladder truck will be replaced with a new ladder truck being built, anticipate delivery in 10-12 months;*

2) Operating Budget:

17. Recognizing that the budget was prepared some months ago and we now have better revenue projections, would it be possible to add 4 new FF positions to the FY2021 budget and stay within the levy limit?

Additional resources for the 2021 budget are analyzed per the Board of Selectmen's Strategic Plan as well as department and community needs. If the Town were to include an additional 4 firefighters in the 2021 budget without an override, it would detract from other departments' needs.

18. Would the overtime costs decline with the addition of 2 (or 4) more positions?

Theoretically, if there are no changes in call volume or staffing patterns adding new firefighters to the staff should reduce overtime. However there are two significant changes being implemented effective July 1: Contractual mid-shift call-back procedures will change (potentially less overtime); and start of shift minimum staffing will increase (potentially more overtime). We are unable to forecast the net effect of these changes on total annual overtime spending. In addition, we cannot predict call volume, overlapping calls, open positions and injured on duty all of which will impact overtime spending.

19. What other budget lines (if any) outside of the Fire Department's budget increase when new positions are funded? (Health, retirement, life insurance, Medicare, other?)

Retirement, Medicare, Health Insurance, Life Insurance, Line of Duty/111F Insurance.

20. What is the current thinking on applying for a SAFER Grant? Is it dependent or independent of the FY2021 budget?

The SAFER grant is not a good solution for adding 8 firefighter/EMT/Paramedics in a community bound by the limitations of proposition 2 ½. The SAFER grant provides 75% reimbursement for two years, then 35% for the third year, then zero reimbursement. The problem is Falmouth cannot absorb the wages and benefits of 8 additional positions in the third and fourth years without either an override or significant reductions to other departments. If we accept a SAFER grant, then fail to pass an override three years later, we will be faced with the unacceptable choices of laying off firefighters or eliminating positions in other departments.

3) Article 14 - Hire Eight Additional Firefighters:

21. The cost per firefighter position, as shown in the FY2021 budget is approximately \$69,000. The cost per person in the override is nearly \$171,000 (as shown below).

- a. How is the retirement assessment calculated?

The unfunded liability for retirement is calculated as per the Falmouth Retirement System as follows:

Yearly Salary divided by 10,000 = # of units. # of units multiplied by \$100,000-\$150,000 divided by 12 (years remaining to fund unfunded liability)

\$63,470/10,000=6.347, 6.347x\$125,000/12 = \$66,114

b. Does the retirement assessment include an assessment for Other Post Employment Benefits (OPEB)?

The retirement assessment does not include the liability for retiree health insurance (AKA OPEB). Once the retirement system is fully funded the funds previously used for retirement liability will go directly to funding OPEB liability.

c. Several of the items are for only one year (fire academy, etc.) What will the additional levy capacity be used for in FY 2022?

Yearly Salary		63,470
Retirement Assessment		66,114
Holiday pay		3,121
Medicare 1.45%		920
Health Ins (Family Plan)		20,000
Educational Incentive (Associates Degree)		1,000
LOD/111F Insurance		678
Life Ins		9
Uniform		1,680
Protective Gear		3,350
Fire Academy		9,910
Staff Development (Test and Textbooks)		590
Total Cost		\$170,842

The chart shows the total cost to hire a firefighter/EMT/paramedic. Not all the costs are annual but there is future training and protective gear replacement that should be considered. Staff development is ongoing while textbooks would be a one-time cost.

22. It is all but impossible that these positions will be filled on July 1st. Therefore, a turn-back should be anticipated for the unused portion of the salaries and other expenses. Will those funds revert to free cash in July 2021?

Yes.

23. Why is the Town proposing 8 new positions? Considering the two positions that are proposed in the FY2021 budget and need for multiples of 4 firefighters per shift, why

not request 6 or 10 additional staff?

The 8 new override positions will provide an ability to start the shift with 16 firefighters. The two positions included in the FY2021 budget provide an allowance for vacation, injured on duty and other leave to ensure there are 16 firefighters available at the start of each shift and limit the need for working consecutive shifts.

24. Is it possible to use temporary workers and/or interns as is reportedly done around the nation to fill the staffing gaps while the permanent fire/rescue staffing is brought up to what is deemed necessary over several years?

In order to maintain safety standards, employees of the Falmouth FD need to be fire academy trained, fully qualified, and medically certified. It is unlikely that individuals would go through such extensive training without a promise of full-time, benefited employment. In order to enroll in the Massachusetts Fire Academy, one needs to be a full-time employee of a MA fire department.

25. Would the Board of Selectmen consider using a “pyramid” or tiered” override approach on the ballot for May 19, 2020?

The Board of Selectmen can consider this option but there is some concern about the potential confusion that a complex tiered override might create.

26. If the appropriation to hire eight additional firefighters is adopted by Town Meeting and the Prop 2 1/2 Override question is approved by voters will there be enough funded positions to staff a new station (assuming 5 stations overall)?

The number of positions required to effectively operate 5 stations will depend in part on the location of the new station. The ultimate locations of the five fire stations as well as call loading will determine future staffing needs.

27. Seven firefighter positions were funded in the previous 5 years. Plus 10 new positions for FY 2021 (with override). What is the expectation for when these positions would be on-line and available for calls?

We anticipate it will take 8 to 12 months from the date of approval to hire and train new firefighter/EMT/paramedics. Assuming approval at the Town election May 19, 2020 we would anticipate the new firefighters to be on duty between January and April of 2021.

28. How many positions are available at the fire academy(s)? Can 10 recruits for the Falmouth Fire Department be trained concurrently at the academy?

Yes, we anticipate 10 recruits can be placed in fire academy training such that they will be trained within the 8 – 12 month timeline referenced in #27.

4) West Falmouth Fire Station:

29. At the High School Meeting four options were shown that could help keep the West Falmouth Fire Station open (Prop 2 1/2 Override, SAFER, private ambulance, voluntary overtime.) But only two have any chance of being feasible for a July 1st start (private ambulance, voluntary overtime). What is the current thinking on these two options?

The Town Manager's Office will be making inquiries with the companies that provide private ambulance service in the region to determine whether there is interest in bidding on municipal ambulance service. Implementation of a private ambulance service requires collective bargaining with the union and approval of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

We are working with the union to implement a voluntary overtime plan effective 7/1/2020 to add two firefighter/EMT/paramedics to be assigned to the West Falmouth Station at the start of shift.

30. If the overtime option were used, the cost would be approximately \$50/hour (overtime rate) x 2 positions x 24 hours per day x 365 days per year = \$876,000 per year. Would you recommend funding this from Certified Free Cash at the November 2020 Town Meeting? Or would it go on the FY2021 tax levy?

As referenced under #18, there are many factors that affect overtime and there are substantial changes in start of shift staffing and call back procedures that are being implemented in FY2021. We are not able to accurately forecast overtime in the face of these changes. We will carefully review overtime spending trends as we approach the November 2020 Town Meeting. The Town is fortunate to have strong financial flexibility which gives us the ability to address potential increased overtime costs during the middle of the fiscal year.

31. Could the Town contract with a private ambulance company and locate them in the West Falmouth Station area of operation? Is there a cost estimate for this option?

We do not know whether it is feasible for a private ambulance company to supplement the Town's emergency medical ambulance, and, if it is feasible, what subsidy the Town might have to offer to make it financially worthwhile. It is possible that a private ambulance company could operate out of the West Falmouth Station but in accordance with Massachusetts regulation, the ambulance cannot serve West Falmouth exclusively. All ambulances must respond to calls on a first-available basis within Town borders and in some cases in abutting towns as well.