

Final



City of Helena

**Fire Service Planning Committee
Report to the
Helena City Commission**

Executive Summary

December, 2007

*Presented
to
Commission
on 2-6-08*

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Using an approach that has been used with nearly all of the other city operations, the City brought together a committee to review the Fire Department and its services. The Fire Service Planning Committee (FSPC) has completed its review. The FSPC used the Lewis and Clark County/City of Helena report developed by consultant ESCi as our initial information source to help the committee understand the Helena Fire Service in general and challenges due to industry changes and Helena's growth. Our recommendations, #1, #2, #3 and #5 address existing needs by strengthening the current organization due to the growth of the community, industry changes and the associated call volume workload. Recommendations #4 and #6 position Helena's "Guardians of the Gulch" for future growth.

OVERVIEW

The Fire Service Planning Committee (FSPC) was established on January 29, 2007 by City Commission Resolution 19440. FSPC was tasked with reviewing:

1. the services currently provided by the Fire Department;
2. service levels within each division of the Fire Department (HazMat, EMS);
3. staffing, equipment and facility needs to adequately provide services; and,
4. sustainable funding source(s).

The FSPC has seventeen members (*Appendix A*), appointed by the City Commission to represent the community as a whole. Accordingly, members are from a variety of backgrounds, affiliations, and interests, with an emphasis on diversity.

MEETINGS

The FSPC had twelve two-hour meetings, which were open to the public, from April through November 2007. The United States Forest Service provided the services of Amy Teegarden as Facilitator for the meetings.

PROCESS

The FSPC used an open discussion format to work through its process. The FSPC:

- first focused upon the "what and why" of current operations and standards;
- followed by questioning whether current operations and standards still provide the best service option(s);
- concluded by reviewing the most economic and effective way to provide and fund the recommended service levels.
- recommendation summary information is included in (*Appendix B*)

The FSPC used authoritative documentation in their review process:

1. Lewis & Clark County and City of Helena Fire Protection Service Review of August 2006 conducted by Emergency Services Consulting inc.

2. Several comparative surveys of the other major fire departments throughout Montana.
3. Several national standards documents. (i.e. OSHA, NFPA, NREMT, etc.)

SERVICES REVIEWED

The FSPC reviewed the primary service areas provided by the City and area fire departments. These primary service areas fall into the following categories:

- Fire Suppression (structure, wildland and aircraft)
- Fire Prevention, Code Enforcement and Fire Safety Public Education
- Emergency Medical Non-Transport Service (EMS)
- Hazardous Materials (HazMat) Response (technician and operational levels)
- Mutual Aid (formal cooperative relationships with Rural Volunteer Fire Departments)

The FSPC concluded that all the above listed primary services are germane to fire service in general, and especially pertinent to the City of Helena Fire Department. The FSPC also supports the current tiered EMS response model in partnership with St. Peter's Ambulance services and the current HazMat technician level services. Both are deemed necessary to provide an enhanced margin of safety for Helena's citizens. Additionally, the FSPC concludes that the Helena Fire Department is dependent on firefighter callback as well as Rural Fire Mutual Aid to staff a major incident. Therefore the FSPC recommends the City Commission add funding to the fire department budget to assist the department in developing and strengthen firefighter training, county-wide cooperative fire response planning, and county-wide incident management training.

FUNDING OPTIONS

The FSPC spent considerable time reviewing the methods available to Montana cities to fund public safety agencies, including but not limited to:

1. Public Safety Mill Levy (voter approval required)

The Montana Legislature provided the Public Safety Levy as the vehicle to use to add additional funding for public safety agency operations.

2. General Obligation Debt (voter approval required)

This is a voter approval option that is considered the primary option for capital facility and equipment acquisition.

3. Fees for Services (No voter approval required)

Fees are a primary option when considering funding equity. Property taxes are not paid by tax-exempt entities that receive a significant benefit. However, establishing a public safety fee for service, which would include the tax-exempt entities, is very difficult under Montana laws. Additionally, fees carry a tremendous negative aspect. The FSPC concluded fire fees were not an adequate method to fund the Fire Department. The FSPC

supports the idea of continuing to work with tax-exempt entities to find an equitable solution the funding issue.

4. Impact Fees (No voter approval required)

Impact fees cannot be used to fund ongoing operating costs. However, they may readily be used in conjunction with General Obligation Debt as a means of reducing the tax levy to repay such debt.

FIRE SERVICE PLANNING COMMITTEE
RECOMMENDATIONS

Fire Department Priority Recommendations

While the FSPC used an open discussion format throughout its review it was agreed upon to use a secret ballot to vote on the final recommendations to the commission. Not all of the committee members voted. The State of Montana representative abstained and three members did not attend enough meetings to make an informed vote. City staff did not participate in the voting.

Priority considerations and FSPC recommendations are as follows:

1. Additional Firefighters: Add 9 firefighters to better staff fire suppression needs.

Vote - Unanimous

\$544,833 Annual Cost Estimate

a. Issue - Add nine firefighters to existing operations to allow the fire crews at fire stations #1 and #2 to work within an adequate and consistent operating force of four firefighters each and assures consistency to the emergency response. Secondly, it will allow the Battalion Chief of each shift to function as a full-time supervisor, not the dual role (firefighter and supervisor) they currently do. By eliminating the dual role we will be enhancing the fire operation by establishing clear roles and appropriate skills and competency, in addition to making the firefighter's job safer.

b. Funding – The FSPC recommends a on-going Public Safety Levy

2. Additional Fire Inspector: Hire 1 new fire inspector for the fire prevention bureau.

Vote – 9 to 1 in favor

\$70,511 Annual Cost Estimate

a. Issue: This new position will manage the Company Inspection Program and focus upon small retail/office inspections. This increase will allow the current inspector to focus on the higher risk occupancies.

b. Funding - The FSPC recommends an on-going Public Safety Levy

3. Capital Reserves for Buildings: Fire Station #2.

Vote - Unanimous *\$107,762 Annual Cost Estimate for ten years*

- a. Issue - The City's east-side station (Station #2) is in desperate need of an upgrade and remodel in order to better meet the current and future service needs provided from that location.
- b. Funding - The FSPC recommends that funding would be sunset with the completion of the loan.

4. Capital Replacement Program: Establish an equipment replacement program

Vote – 8 to 2 in favor *\$245,000 Annual Cost Estimate*

- a. Issue - The FSPC believes it is prudent to establish an ongoing funding mechanism for replacement of capital equipment and current facility repair and upkeep.
- b. Funding - The FSPC recommends an on-going Public Safety Levy

5. City Commission supported Response Times: The City Commission should direct the Fire Chief to establish a department-wide response time. *No Costs*

Vote – Unanimous

- a. Issue – The FSPC believes it beneficial for fire department operations to establish an official response benchmark. Such action allows the community and the department to measure expectations and performance. A 90 % attainment level is also recommended.
- b. Funding – no levy is needed.

6. Future Station Needs – Third Fire Station: Begin preliminary steps for a future fire station.

- a. Issue -Development trends show an additional City of Helena fire station will be needed in approximately 5 years. Preliminary planning steps are recommended to begin at this time:
 - 1. Identify complimentary partnerships for a multi-purpose public safety facility.
 - 2. Location Determination
 - 3. Facility / Station Design
 - 4. Preparatory staff hiring and training
 - 5. Sustainable Funding Source
- b. Funding - Funding for preliminary steps should be included in the General Fund (pending Commission approval)

Concurrent Public Safety Recommendation-

The FSPC has only reviewed the fire service. After reviewing and examining the Fire department's current situation and along with our recommendation for a Public Safety Levy, we encourage the City Commission to look at the community's other public safety needs before conducting a voter approved levy.

Appendix A

Fire Service Planning Committee

Facilitator

Amy Teegarden,

U. S. Forest Service

Public Representatives

Sandy Oitzinger

City Commissioner

Ed Tinsley

County Commissioner

Cheryl Liedle

Sheriff

Ellen Bell

Helena Citizens Council

Bob Drake

Rural Fire Council Representative

Bret Ruby

U. S. Forest Service

Cory O'Brian

Firefighter's Union

Dan Herrera

Fort Harrison

Fred Lubke

Citizen at Large

John Solheim

St. Peter's Hospital

Marv Eicholtz

Montana Dept. of Administration

Rick Hays

Retired Businessman

Ron Mercer

Helena Regional Airport

City Staff

Tim Burton

City Manager

Steve Larson

Fire Chief

David Nielsen

City Attorney

Tim Magee

Administrative Services Director

County Staff

Ron Alles

County Manager

News Media

Larry Kline

Helena Independent Record