



Public Safety & Transportation Committee

Budget Report

City of Newton

In City Council

Thursday, May 18, 2023

Present: Councilors Downs (Chair), Oliver, Lucas, Malakie, Bowman and Grossman

Absent: Councilors Lipof and Markiewicz

Also present: Councilors Wright, Albright and Greenberg

City staff: Chief Greg Gentile and Assistant Chief Mike Bianchi, Newton Fire Department; Superintendent George McMains and Matthew Tocchio, IT Director, Newton Police Department; Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer; Perry Rosenfield, Senior Financial Analyst; Connor Roach, Senior Financial Analyst and Maureen Lemieux, Chief Financial Officer

Others present: NewTV

Please Note: Budget materials can be found on the City's website at the following link:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/government/comptroller/budget>

DEPARTMENT BUDGET & CIP DISCUSSIONS:

Fire Department

#1-23 **Submittal of the FY 2024 to FY 2028 Capital Improvement Plan**
HER HONOR THE MAYOR submitting the Fiscal Years 2024 to 2028 Capital Improvement Plan pursuant to section 5-3 of the Newton City Charter.

Referred to Finance and Appropriate Committees

#1-23(3) **Submittal of the FY24 Municipal/School Operating Budget**
HER HONOR THE MAYOR submitting in accordance with Section 5-1 of the City of Newton Charter the FY24 Municipal/School Operating Budget, passage of which shall be concurrent with the FY24-FY28 Capital Improvement Program (#213-22).
EFFECTIVE DATE OF SUBMISSION 05/01/23; LAST DATE TO PASS THE BUDGET 06/15/23

Referred to Finance and Appropriate Committees

#1-23(4) **Submittal of the FY24 – FY28 Supplemental Capital Improvement Plan**
HER HONOR THE MAYOR submitting the FY24 – FY28 Supplemental Capital Improvement Plan.

Fire Department

Note: Chief Greg Gentile and Assistant Chief Mike Bianchi, Newton Fire Department; and Chief Financial Officer, Maureen Lemieux joined the Committee to discuss the Fire Department Budget.

Chief Gentile stated that last year the Fire Department responded to 10,434 calls. This marks the most calls in NFD history, beating its 2019 run total. We saw our runs gradually going up from 2017, 2018 and 2019. 2020 and 2021 we saw lower run numbers, perhaps due to the pandemic.

This year, the department attacked 19 building fires, including 5 working fires, including the 4-alarm fire on Gray Cliff Road. Our first goal is to prevent fires. We respond quickly to building fires, keeping response times down as low as possible. We hope that no fires make the news because that means we did our job, a tribute to the men and women of this department.

We continue to see the city expand; the Fire Prevention Bureau has never been busier with permits, inspections, and plan reviews. Assistant Chief Bianchi and I make sure the Bureau has the necessary resources to continue moving projects along and ensure that all safety measures are in place.

Firefighter training is a large component of what the department does. The training division does an incredible job providing 12,000 training hours for 190 members, including technical rescue training. This year, the department spent time training on technical elevator rescues. We have seen an increase in elevator calls. Last year, the department made 50 elevator rescues, a sharp increase from 10 years ago when there were under 30 elevator calls. Last year, the department responded to over 330 vehicle accidents.

FIRE DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL & STAFFING:

The Fire Department employs 199 full time employees.

FIRE DEPARTMENT FY2023 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- The department maintained its Class 1 Fire Rating through extensive training and updated software, along with supporting our DPW in maintaining our water supply system. NFD is one of only 487 of the 46,000 fire departments/districts in the United States to receive this rating. We continued to replace bunker gear as it approaches the end of its useful life and added another set of gear, so all firefighters are issued two sets.
- Trained and graduated five new recruits at the Mass Fire Academy to Firefighter Level 1 & 2 certification who are now assigned to the NFD.
- Offered eleven conditional letters of employment with recruits entering the Fire Academy in February and March 2023.

Outcome 1, Increase Community Engagement - Assistant Chief Bianchi stated that he has been working on ways to get the department engaged in the community. This year, we held a job fair at Newton South High School. We met with the United Methodist Church pastor discussing community engagement, explaining what it is to be a firefighter, providing firefighter test dates and explaining that we can help an individual prepare for an exam. We plan to continue visiting village days, holding station tours and getting the word out that we are looking for individuals to become part of the Newton Fire Department.

The department is making community outreach a year-round priority, focusing on relationships with the people we serve, ensuring we deliver services in a respectful manner, and educating people from all backgrounds on the rewarding career of a firefighter. We will meet with leaders of our community and their constituents, from many different backgrounds, genders, religions and ethnicities to explore ways to increase diversity in our department. Improving diversity within our department will allow us to grow, improve, and be responsive to the community. It is imperative that we continue to open our doors to the community and share what it's like to be a firefighter. Firefighting remains one of the most rewarding careers – working as a team, being part of the firefighting family, helping in emergencies, and serving the community are just a few of those reasons. Our community engagement efforts aim to spread this message. Our community engagement includes fire station visits, open houses, village days (touch a truck), fire prevention, safety week, job fairs, career days and public education programs.

Outcome 2, Upgrade and improve fire radio frequencies – Chief Gentile stated that by December 2023, we intend to complete and upgrade our simulcast radio system. This system has the potential to make our system one of the best in the state, if not the best. We've been working on this project for some time and were able to secure the funding. The simulcast radio system covers four frequencies including two fire frequencies and two police frequencies. The largest accomplishment is the ability for fire and police to communicate inside of buildings. It will no longer be required to use bi-directional antennas (BDA).

The department finalized a request for proposals and worked with Purchasing to award a contract for an upgraded radio system. This system will add transmitters to create a large network of radio transmitters and receivers. This large network works together to reduce dead zones (similar to your cell phone losing signal when traveling through the city) and enhances coverage within buildings, including all 22 school buildings. We are planning to have the system fully operational by December 2023.

The department also sought and received a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Fire Services to upgrade most of the front-line apparatus's radios so they can be programmed over our radio management system. This allows our personnel to be deployed faster to meet evolving emergencies.

Outcome 3, Train our members – Chief Gentile stated that this year, 25 new firefighters were trained in technical rescue. Five years ago, we had trained 25 to the technician level, some have moved on, some have been promoted out. The department has hired approximately 30 or 40 people since then.

This year, training will be focused on leadership training through a FEMA grant. Early leaders, including lieutenants and captains are working on creating a respectful workplace and how to resolve conflicts. We feel this training will have a positive impact throughout the department. The decision making from the first officers is often the difference between a successful incident or not. We will focus on giving our officers the tools to support employees that report directly to them. The topics will range from city resources that are available for their safety, health, and wellness, how to maintain a respectful workplace, and how to resolve conflicts. Leadership skills on fire-ground operations will include decision making of the first companies, including such factors as building construction and smoke patterns. We are hopeful the training is going to be effective because we feel that's an area where we can improve.

The Training Division had a great year in 2022 with over 10,000 hours of training. We have had great success with our elevator training program, which has transformed how we respond to elevator rescue calls. The members were also trained in confined space rescue, trench rescue, rope rescue, water rescue, as well as vehicle and structural collapse rescue. At the end of 2022, the department hosted retired FDNY Bronx Battalion Chief John Salka for leadership training. The Training Division will keep the momentum going in 2023.

Fire Prevention Bureau members will be trained as Fire Investigator Technicians to allow them to better identify and investigate the sources of ignition; funding for this is provided by a FEMA Fire Prevention Grant.

Outcome 4, Emergency response and mitigation – Chief Gentile stated that the department will continue to provide the best emergency response and mitigation possible. We believe that the call volumes are going to increase, if not stay the same, the department is ready and prepared to handle all calls.

The department will continue to provide emergency response to many types of emergencies including fires, rescuing individuals who become trapped in, on, or under something, hazardous situations, and medical emergencies. Emergency preparedness includes: equipment maintenance, system checks, and training. Once on scene, our trained personnel work to mitigate any situation they encounter. Our goals remain to protect life and to preserve property and the environment whenever possible.

FIRE DEPARTMENT BUDGET FY2024

The following are significant line item changes to expenses in the budget:

Fire Administration - \$46,766 increase
Fire Rescue - \$1,399,652 increase
Fire Prevention – \$50,647.00 increase
Fire Alarm Services – \$24,356 increase
Fire Station Maintenance - \$20,000 increase
Fire Communications - \$44,574 increase
Fire Training - \$28,312 increase

GRANT, GIFT & REVOLVING FUND

Federal Assistance to Firefighters Grant \$225,000
 State Regional HAZMAT Response Grant Program \$75,000
 Fire Department Damage Recovery Revolving \$100,000
 Fire Department Gifts \$10,000

Q&A

Q: Is the radio infrastructure cost shared between the Police and Fire Departments?

A: Chief Gentile answered yes, the radio simulcast system, paid for with CIP money, was completed by our Purple Team (Blue & Red).

Q: Please explain about the increase in responses. Can you provide last years' data on suppressions, EMS calls, and crashes?

A: Chief Gentile answered that both suppression responses and EMS responses increased year over year. Below is the graph for EMS and Suppression calls from 2019 to 2022.

NFD Responses per year

	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2022</u>
EMS	4633	4554	5123	5190
Suppression	4917	4222	4409	5244
Total	9550	8776	9532	10434

Q: Regarding fire prevention, do people renting in Newton express concerns that their fire detectors might not be working or that they do not have a second egress out of a room? I am curious if the department inspects apartments and checks if standards are adhered to. What are the top things that you see?

A: Chief Gentile answered that we do inspections, but are limited by the law as to when we can require an inspection. Anytime a home is sold, we inspect it. We do hear from concerned renters and address any issues. We do have limitations on entering and inspecting. Most landlords, if not all, when we engage them in conversation, they want their property to be safe and will pay for any costs incurred. We haven't seen an unwilling landlord.

Q: When the department is doing community engagement, one topic you might consider is educating people on how they can make their homes safer and the types of problems that people may experience.

A: Chief Gentile answered that it a great idea, and will forward that suggestion to Fire Prevention. One program underway is to check on smoke detectors in the homes of older adults. We received a grant several months ago to do that, to purchase smoke detectors, and then to assist elders in the installation process.

Q: Are there CIP projects the department would like to reference? Is the department purchasing a new pumper truck?

A: Chief Gentile answered yes, Council approved the purchase a year ago of a new engine seven. The new engine has been designed and we expect delivery soon. Delivery times have increased over the years. This is the first truck that Assistant Chief Bianchi and I have bought. Five years ago, the time frame was 10 to 12 months.

Q: I don't see fire hydrants in the Fire Department Budget. Is the department maintaining and replacing fire hydrants?

A: Chief Gentile answered that fire hydrants fall under the water department in the DPW Budget. Fire and Water departments work together to inspect flow and report findings. Fire hydrants are replaced if they have an issue, but he does not know the process DPW uses to replace fire hydrants.

Q: This year, were there any issues at any fire with the fire hydrants?

A: Chief Gentile answered that there was one fire hydrant out of service at the Gray Cliff Road fire. We went back to our records, and it had been tested three months earlier; it's just a random thing that does happen. It is the reason why we send an extra engine to take a second hydrant at every structure fire that's reported.

Q: How big is the problem of recruitment? Are we on the precipice of a pending crisis? Prior to the pandemic, we were having issues with vacancies and getting people in the academy. Since the pandemic, it feels like we continue to struggle to find candidates. What can the city do to attract fire personnel? Where do you see this going in the future? Is an update available?

A: Chief Gentile answered that we've seen our candidate numbers dwindle in the past five years. Our list used to be around 100 Newton residents looking for a fire career. Now, I think we're in the 30s. We have people on our Newton list that are interested in the job, but we are trying to be proactive about it. We discuss ideas on how to get others involved. How do you get uninformed people interested in fire careers and how do you bring those people in, because that's going to expand the pool, and diversify the pool of candidates. Right now, we are not concerned about the numbers. It's concerning that there has been a drastic drop in the number of people that are looking for civil service jobs.

Q: Has the Human Resources Department been actively involved in helping you shape recruitment efforts? What are other steps you might take to deepen interest?

A: Chief Gentile answered yes. Recruitment is not taught at the Fire Academy. We are looking for assistance and ideas to reach the community.

Q: What do you think is the reason why the people in the academy were not successful and will not graduate?

A: Chief Gentile stated that he will hold off on any judgment on the reasons. We've been doing the hiring process for seven years. We've had one or two recruits in those seven years, who do not make it through the academy for various reasons. This year, all three candidates had completely different sets of circumstances. We have six candidates at the Springfield Academy now and they're set to pass.

Q: Regarding management training, what happens when somebody is promoted to a leadership position to manage others, and has had no management training? How are you measuring success with respect to the different efforts that you put into place over the past year?

A: Chief Gentile answered that management training is tough to measure. We've looked at some incidents and said how did this happen and what could we have done better? We realized we can spend more time and focus on that area. The first level supervisor is the foundation of the department, the first to the scene, but they're also the first to deal with any conflicts within the stations. We have to do a better job of training new and old officers, and will continue to train and create a system for the correct training year after year.

Q: In your budget, there was a 1.7% increase in FY23. Was that correct? This year there is a 5.89% increase over FY23.

A: Ms. Lemieux answered that in 2021 and 2022 we have the actual funds spent. The 2023 line only reflects the budget. In FY22, at the end of last year, when we requested \$1,625,000 for overtime. When we print the books next year for 2023, it will have increased by this \$1,500,000 that we requested earlier this evening for Fire Rescue Overtime.

Q: Regarding recruitment, the department appears to be overwhelmingly male. Are you having any success in recruiting at school job fairs? Are we getting more women interested in this career?

A: Chief Gentile answered that is the goal. We're trying to increase diversity. For the first time in seven years, we interviewed a woman. Some women are now showing interest in the job.

Q: Do you have a sense of why women are not showing an interest in the Fire Department?

A: Chief Gentile answered that it's a combination of being a very physical job and a misconception about the job. We are focusing on people that don't understand what the job entails and don't know everything that comes with this job. The good and the bad.

Q: Is there a growing concern about environmental exposure in the firefighting profession? What is being done to reduce exposures that may cause health effects?

A: Chief Gentile answered that in the past 10 years, fire service began talking about the carcinogens in smoke. We have taken great steps in reducing exposure. Every station has a gear extractor (washing machine) and a dryer. We've created policies and procedures to ensure gear is being washed and equipment is being cleaned. Approximately eight years ago, we recognized that per-and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) are waterproofing chemicals that are used in a lot of areas including our turnout gear. Approximately four years ago, we switched to a different manufacturer, trying to reduce firefighter exposure to PFAS. To this day, there is no PFAS-free firefighting gear that meets National Fire Protection Standards (NFPA). There is a national campaign change those standards, and remove PFAS completely from the bunker gear.

Q: Why is the department limited to what they can do in an apartment inspection, if you are invited in?

A: Chief Gentile answered that the department is not limited if invited in.

Q: Does the department have its own gas leak detection equipment to confirm what National Grid is telling you?

A: Chief Gentile answered yes, we do have gas detection, but the gas detection we use is to determine whether an enclosed area has a potentially explosive amount of gas in it.

Q: Could you check under a manhole?

A: yes.

Q: What is the department capacity for the number of calls per week, per month, per year? Given the level of equipment that you currently have or level of staffing? Is there a point where something has to change?

A: We look at response times, because that means that we're meeting our goals and expectations. As long as we're doing that, we feel like we have capacity. It is not something we don't discuss.

Q: Are there upcoming large projects which will increase call volumes, and by how much?

A: We discuss this with Fire Prevention because we do have to try to predict future calls. The metric we pay attention to is the run time.

Assistant Chief Bianchi added that he performs impact studies by reviewing comparable buildings over the last few years. It is not a perfect comparison, but allows us to estimate the number of calls we may receive on a new project.

Q: About a year ago, we were discussing training within the department about treating everyone with respect. Has everyone in the department completed this training? Have you seen any differences within the department?

A: Chief Gentile answered between 90% - 96% of the department has completed this training. Some members were not trained because they were out long term. We think that this is an important piece and are focused on it. Is it succeeding? We will discuss this with HR to ensure our training is hitting the mark.

Q: What are the residency requirements for fire personnel prior to and after hiring?

A: To get the residency preference for the Civil Service list, a recruit has to live in the city for one year prior to the test. After they are hired, we have a rule which requires them to live within 35 miles of the city.

Q: Regarding community engagement, years ago, fire trucks would be sent to block parties in the city. Is this something the Fire and Police Departments might collaborate on –letting people know a fire truck can be sent to their block party if they want one?

A: Assistant Chief Bianchi answered yes, he would love to re-start such an option. Logistically and operationally, it would be necessary to discuss this at the time of permitting.

Comments

I am surprised to hear that the department only responded to 330 vehicle crashes.

I hope everyone in the department completes training in respecting others, and we see differences compared to where we were last year.

If we want to recruit more people to the department, it will be necessary to build housing that's appropriate for young people who might be starting as firefighters.

The Committee took a straw vote to accept the Fire Department budget of \$29,191,045, a 5.89% increase from FY23, which passed unanimously. This year, there were no CIP projects for the Fire Department.

The Committee adjourned at 9:28 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Andreae Downs, Chair