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Mesa fire department preparing for deep cut

By Mike Sakal
Tribune

In what is being described as "devastating cuts to public safety," Mesa city leaders are requesting that the fire department cut up to 10 percent of its budget, according to a memo released by Chief Harry Beck.

Citing declining city revenues as a result of the recession that the city expects to last three to five years, the pending cuts will have a "severe impact on our service level in the community and put jobs at risk," according to Beck. The city is asking for cuts of \$1.1 million to \$5.4 million for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

According to Tuesday's memo, overtime in the fire department is immediately suspended, all current and future vacant positions will remain frozen and unfilled while engine and ladder companies are subject to suspension, or "brownouts," on a shift-by-shift basis to assist with filling vacancies.

Mesa Historical Museum to cut hours [<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/149690>]

Bryan Jeffries, president of the United Mesa Fire Fighters IAFF Local 2260, told the Tribune on Wednesday that the cuts will severely impact emergency response times and could immediately take trucks off the street, including front-line emergency vehicles.

"We're prepared to do whatever it takes to prevent layoffs," Jeffries said. "If they hold us to \$5.4 million, which is 10 percent of the fire department's budget, I don't know what we'll do. It's so devastating to look at, I haven't run the numbers yet."

Jeffries went on to say that the city administration is requesting that city departments prioritize what is absolutely needed to effectively operate, outline where 10 percent in cuts can be made and turn in those possible cuts to City Manager Chris Brady by the end of the month.

The fire department currently has about 364 firefighters and is expected to be in the low 330s by next year after retirements, or attrition, according to Jeffries.

Mesa expects at least 20 firefighters will retire in roughly the next year, and that it won't replace any of them. That could force a major reorganization and possibly closing fire stations to ensure staffing is available to handle calls, said Councilman Dennis Kavanaugh, who is also chairman of the Public Safety Committee.

"You would see a very dramatic change in programs that we offer that would be gone or down to a bare minimum," he said.

The city will keep four-person crews as a standard, Kavanaugh said, but will have to look at trimming nonessential areas like fire prevention.

The cuts in staffing could cost lives, said Councilman Scott Somers, who is a Phoenix firefighter.

As an example, he cited a Wednesday call his crew responded to at a grocery store, where a man was having trouble breathing. By the time the crew arrived, his heart had stopped. The man was revived, Somers said, but only because the crew had the equipment, staffing and training.

"If we had shown up with less than the optimal number of folks, that gentleman may not have survived," Somers said.

The real effect on public safety can't be measured, Somers said, though he would expect more fires in the city if prevention efforts are cut.

"The trouble with this is you won't really notice it," Somers said. "You don't know when fire prevention is gone because how do you measure or appreciate something that never happened?"

The current round of budget cuts come on top of across-the-board 2 percent pay cuts in July, 2009, and upwards of \$6 million in cuts the fire department took last year. The latest hits to its budget are at least the seventh straight year the fire department is experiencing major cuts under Beck's tenure as chief.

To maintain critical support functions, the fire department will reorganize and reassign support positions when necessary, the memo stated.

"The city revenue picture is changing month to month," Beck said.

Beck later stated in the memo that, "These are uncertain times, and we will continue to support city activities that solicit the community for direction regarding the services we provide and the level of quality that is expected."

All Mesa departments are planning for cuts of up to 10 percent, City Manager Chris Brady said. The city hopes it won't have to cut that deep, he said, adding the request gives Mesa choices to consider as it makes decisions.

"We want to have more than one option," Brady said.

It could take a couple of months to know just how much will be cut, though the City Council will get its first look at the budget in about a week.



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