

Fire Public Safety Working Group's Proposal to the City of Alexandria for Fire Compensation Strategy

The Fire Public Safety Working Group ("Fire PSWG") is made up of members of the Alexandria Fire Fighters Local 2141, the Black Fire Service Professionals Association, and the Alexandria Professional Medics Association. Together, these three groups' membership make-up approximately 98 percent of the employees of the Alexandria Fire Department. The Fire PSWG provides the following proposal to the City of Alexandria to suggest solutions for the problems that the department's pay scale presents.

Although the City has a "pay philosophy" that requires it to compensate its fire department employees at 100 percent of the average of nearby comparator jurisdiction's, the City's own pay analysis shows that the pay for fire fighters and medics in Alexandria lags far behind neighboring jurisdictions. The survey shows that fire fighters in Alexandria make, on average, 16 percent less on an hourly basis, than neighboring jurisdictions. For medics, the number is even more dire. On an hourly basis, medics in Alexandria make more than 25 percent less than neighboring jurisdictions. This pay deficit has caused many skilled fire fighters and medics to leave Alexandria for other jurisdictions. It also causes understaffing in the department, which leads to longer response times because there are less responders available.

The Fire PSWG's proposal is intended to rectify the imbalance between the City of Alexandria and other nearby communities. It is very important that the City implement this proposal for FY19. The Alexandria Fire Department continues to lose great fire fighters and paramedics to neighboring jurisdictions. As a result of this understaffing, the department has increased overtime and holdovers in order to adequately staff the engines, ladder trucks and medic units on the street. The other major problem is that the department is not progressing from the limited staffing. Alexandria is the only department in the region that has cross staffed an engine and rescue squad. The rescue squad is a specialized piece of apparatus with capabilities of vehicle rescue, rope rescue among other specialty skills and it is the only one in the city, yet it is being underutilized because the department is understaffed. The department also has not implemented any more advanced life support (ALS) engines and has only three (3) fire fighters on its ladder trucks and some engines. There is a plan for a SAFER grant to assist the department with staffing but if the department cannot retain the fire fighters and paramedics that it hires and trains, then the City, its residents, and taxpayers lose the benefit of hiring and training these first responders.

The recruitment and retention issue in the Alexandria Fire Department can be linked to two (2) major changes. First, the Alexandria Fire Department underwent a service delivery model change approximately five (5) year ago. As a result of this change, the department has become more similar to neighboring jurisdictions in that the department's fire fighters now perform both emergency medical services (EMS) and fire services. Previously, the City had fire fighters who only engaged in firefighting and paramedics who only engaged in EMS. This used to give the department a unique recruitment and retention tool within the region. However, now that the department's service delivery matches the rest of the region, it must compete with those neighboring jurisdictions for fire fighters and paramedics.

The second issue is that firefighting jobs in general are plentiful and the demand has decreased. For example, just seven (7) years ago there were more than 2,500 applicants to the Alexandria Fire Department and not many departments were hiring. Recently, the department closed a hiring process that had just 950 applicants. On top of that, every department in the region is hiring right now. Furthermore, seven (7) years ago, the department had recruit classes of 20 to 30 people. Currently, the newest class consists of just ten (10) recruits. The current recruit class initially had 14 recruits but was cut down, because some recruits were not able to complete the recruit school. In comparison, from 1994-2010 the department only lost six (6) recruits during recruit school. Since 2010, the department has lost nine (9) recruits during recruit school.

Because of these changes within the Alexandria Fire Department, the department must remain competitive in the region to both properly recruit and retain employees. In just the past three years, the department has lost 45 fire fighters and paramedics due to (1) the service delivery change, (2) the fact that the fire fighters and paramedics can be paid more and work the same or less hours elsewhere, and (3) that senior fire fighters and paramedics within the department tell them to leave the City as soon as they can because the pay and compensation will never improve in the City of Alexandria. Many senior members of the department encourage junior members to leave, because those senior members have seen employee and labor groups continue to raise the same issues regarding pay and compensation year after year without any long-term corrections and no immediate fixes.

The fire fighters and paramedics of the Alexandria Fire Department hope that we can change that this year. This Fire PSWG recommendation was a combined effort of the three employee and labor groups. Our recommendations are as follows. The Fire PSWG strongly believes that the department's recruitment and retention issues would greatly improve if the City (1) increases the compensation of department fire fighters and medics to comply with the City's pay philosophy of paying its employees 100 percent of "average of our comparator jurisdictions," (2) increases incentives for working for the City, and (3) provides better benefits. The Fire PSWG believes that the City can start to achieve this goal this year by doing the following:

- **Pay Scales:** Increase the fire and EMS pay scales at all ranks by 5 percent. The benchmark study shows that when adjusted for hours worked the fire fighters and paramedics are, on average, under paid 15 to 16 percent and 11 to 33 percent respectively when compared with surrounding jurisdictions. This proposed 5 percent increase will not get the City to comply with the pay philosophy of 100 percent of average of comparator jurisdictions, however, it will move the department to be closer to complying with the pay philosophy.
- **Pay Compression:** Correct the officer pay compression by bringing senior officers to the step they would have been if they were to have dropped straight down on the pay scale instead of going down and back several steps. When the City used to promote members of the fire department, it applied a "pay compression" which resulted in the promoted fire fighter or medic being moved to a lower-paying step on the salary scale for his or her new position. This, in effect, caused the promoted employee to lose most of the financial benefit of the promotion. This (1) further underpaid the department's employees, in comparison to surrounding departments and (2) created a financial disincentive for

professional advancement. This practice had been corrected about three years ago, however, there were several officers that never saw the benefit of this change. In fact, they were leapfrogged or their pay was further compressed by newly promoted officers. Reversing this pay compression will achieve two things. First, it alleviates the current compression and leapfrogging within the officer ranks. This correction will affect approximately 20 to 25 officers. Second, this would positively impact the department's more senior officers, the same officers who have been most affected by the low compensation the City has provided year after year. The Fire PSWG strongly believes that this change would keep the department's senior officers from encouraging the newer members to leave the City for another department.

- Lastly, there should be another \$5,000 one-time bonus for all dual role providers and another \$5,000 yearly incentive for dual role providers. This would bring dual role provider incentives to a \$10,000 one-time bonus and \$10,000 yearly incentive for all non-officers. For officers this would be a \$7,500 one-time bonus and \$7,500 yearly bonus. The Fire PSWG also proposes that all the dual role provider yearly incentive pay count toward the employee's retirement. Currently, this incentive is in the employees' paychecks but does not help count toward their income for retirement purposes. Counting the bonus payments toward the employees' retirement would create more incentive for the employees to remain employed by the City. The dual role providers are the most highly sought after providers in the region, much more than single role providers (fire fighters or paramedics). Many jurisdictions pay their providers more in their base salary or provide them with incentives that mirror the one that the Fire PSWG is proposing.

Adopting these three proposals would be a strong first step to help with recruitment and retention; however, the City's fire fighters and paramedics also deserve a long-term plan. Such a long-term plan needs to keep the fire fighters and paramedics at the "true" average of their comparators, to be consistent with the City's pay philosophy and provide incentives and benefits that will attract and retain great fire fighters and paramedics for years to come.

As stated previously, the increases proposed by the Fire PSWG this year will not move the City into compliance with its own pay philosophy. Instead, the Fire PSWG will need to continue to work on this effort through the summer to correct all the department's pay deficits. In order to accomplish this goal, the Fire PSWG requests language in the budget this year that states that the Fire PSWG will continue to work this summer to find a long-term solution to keep the City's fire fighters and paramedics at the average pay of their comparators, as required by the City's pay philosophy. These long-term solutions would include but are not limited to: correcting compensation and accounting for specialty pay in our benchmark study to make it more accurate, decreasing the steps on the pay scale, identifying better benefit packages, etc. The Fire PSWG would then present a long-term solution and its parameters to the City Manager and City Council to be voted on and approved for FY2020.

In this year's budget, the Fire PSWG also requests language that states that the Alexandria Fire Department benchmark studies will be adjusted for hours worked. For years the department has been compared to departments that work far less than City fire fighters and medics and it has never been accounted for in the benchmark study. This causes the City's fire department

employees to be paid even less than the comparators because the City is using a salary that is intended to pay for less hours of work. To be compared fairly, hours worked must be normalized or hourly rates must be used when finding “average of our comparators.” To coincide with this Alexandria must only be compared to other national capital region jurisdictions. The comparator jurisdictions should be clearly defined with justification moving forward. Finally, it is important that language in the yearly budget guidance state that public safety compensation will be evaluated and addressed.

The Fire PSWG understands that there is presently just \$1.5 million (5%) in the budget to address these pay issues for Fire, Police, and the Sheriff and that this proposal requests \$2 million dollars to address these issues for just the fire department. After discussing this with members of the Human Resources department, it appears that there is room for the \$1.5 million dollars to grow to approximately \$2 million dollars or (10%) by October 1, 2018. Because of this, the Fire PSWG believes it would be most beneficial to the Fire Department to wait until October 1, 2018 to implement this proposal. With this \$2 million dollars (10%) and any additional funds the City Council is able to find in the budget, it would give the Fire Department the \$2 million dollars it needs to implement these proposals and also help the Police and Sheriff departments. Therefore, the Fire PSWG requests that the Council vote that in FY2019 the Fire department be given at least \$2 million to increase the fire and EMS pay scales by 5 percent, correct officer pay compression, and increase the dual role provider pay incentive on October 1, 2018.

The members of the Fire PSWG are available to answer any questions related to this proposal or to meet with any representatives of the Human Resources Department, the City Manager’s Office, or City Council to discuss this proposal.