



Legislation Text

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JUNE 3, 2020

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: MARK B. JINKS, CITY MANAGER /s/

DOCKET TITLE:

Consideration of a Grant Application to the 2019 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency.

ISSUE: Consideration of a grant application to the 2019 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) program of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and its subsequent local funding impact.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

- (1) Approve the submission of a grant application to FEMA for \$3.2 million to partially fund the addition of 12 additional firefighters over a three-year period; and
- (2) Authorize the City Manager to execute the necessary documents that may be required.

BACKGROUND: On April 13, 2020, FEMA opened the competitive grant application period for the 2019 SAFER CARES grant program and on May 14 FEMA liberalized the regulations and eliminated the local match requirement. SAFER grants provide financial assistance to help fire departments increase the number of frontline firefighters. The goal of SAFER is to enhance the abilities of fire departments to comply with staffing response and operational standards established by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

The SAFER grant program provides funding to local fire departments to increase staffing and deployment for new positions added to a department. The grant only funds new positions added, it does not pay for existing positions. FEMA's recent grant requirement revisions were targeted by COVID-19's negative fiscal impact on local governments.

The 12 positions would be used as additional firefighters to cover situations where regular firefighters are on light duty or are on sick, annual or other types of leave. These positions sometimes also cover vacant firefighter positions caused by retirements, resignations or other reasons positions become vacant. Unlike most other City departments where a department can function with less than full staffing, Fire operates each of their vehicles with a specific assigned staffing. If a regularly assigned firefighter or medic assignment cannot be filled, then that position needs to be filled for that shift. The person filling in is either an authorized relief person or often someone who is held over from a prior shift or brought in on their day off. If any of these personnel work beyond their regular shift then the result is overtime pay at 1.5 times their customary hourly wage rate.

In recent years the City has moved (to meet national guidelines and regional practices) from a 3-person staffing to a 4-person staffing of engines and ladder trucks. Medic units have 2-person staffing. Currently Fire has 20 relief positions to cover for 238 authorized uniformed fire personnel. That number of relief positions was not increased even though the City added some 36 positions in moving to the 4-person staffing model.

Last year in preparation for the FY 2021 budget process, the City's Office of Performance and Accountability undertook a study to determine what the optimal number of relief positions might be. The conclusion was that 26 more relief positions could be justified. A shortage of relief positions not only triggers the payment of overtime, but also puts existing Fire staff under added stress due to the number of hours that persons work.

As a result of the study, a total of 6 new relief positions were added in the proposed FY 2021 budget and were approved by Council in the adopted FY 2021 Budget version 2.0. Subsequent to the adopted budget, FEMA changed its SAFER grant rules making the application by the City for 12 new relief positions possible. It is intended to have this federal grant cover the 6 relief positions that Council approved as well as 6 additional relief positions. Once these positions are hired and deployed, the City should see Fire Department overtime expenses noticeably decline. In addition, once these positions are in place, an evaluation will occur to see if additional relief positions should be added above the 12 the grant will be paying for.

FISCAL IMPACT: The federal SAFER grant from FEMA will total \$3.2 million over a three-year period. It will cover 100% of the personnel costs for a three-year period. It will not cover uniform and gear costs of about \$57,000 which can be paid from the funds approved in the FY 2021 budget for the 6 relief positions that will now be funded with the federal grant funds. In the fourth year, the City is mandated to keep these 12 positions at its own cost, but that obligation lapses at the end of the fourth year. In total the City should see significant overtime savings starting sometime in FY 2021 (the federal grant needs to be approved, these positions recruited, hired and trained). These overtime savings will accrue each and every year and should be sufficient to cover the fourth year costs.

STAFF:

Debra Collins, Deputy City Manager
Corey Smedley, Fire Chief