

## PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE

May 9, 2022

A meeting of the Public Safety Committee was held this date beginning at 2:03 p.m., by video conference.

Notice of this meeting was sent to all local news media.

### PRESENT

**Committee Members:** Councilmember Shahid (Chairman), Councilmember Seekings (Vice-Chairman), Councilmember Shealy, Mayor Tecklenburg

**Also Present:** Andrea Derungs, Velvett Simmons, Jeremy Collins, Shannon Scaff, Steve Ruemelin, Mallary Scheer, Chief Curia, Julia Copeland, Magalie Creech, Melissa Cruthirds, Rick Jerue, Cassandra Payton, Chief Reynolds, Deputy Chief Thompson, Mollie Jones, Jason Kronsberg

#### 1. Invocation

The meeting was opened with an invocation led by Councilmember Seekings.

#### 2. Approval of Minutes

On a motion of Councilmember Shealy, seconded by Mayor Tecklenburg, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes from the April 11, 2022 meeting.

#### 3. Fire Department: Approval of Regional Partners Automatic Aid Agreement to guide operations of the following fire departments: Charleston, North Charleston, James Island, St. Andrews, Johns Island, and Mount Pleasant. This replaces a 2012 Regional Partners Agreement.

Chief Curia said this was an update of the 2012 Aid Agreement. It said that that whichever local fire department was closest to a reported emergency would respond, regardless of jurisdiction. The biggest change from the 2012 iteration was that Mount Pleasant was now a member.

On a motion of Councilmember Shealy, seconded by Mayor Tecklenburg, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the item above.

#### 4. Fire Department: Approval to authorize the Fire Department to enter a MOU with Berkeley County Emergency Management to install and monitor a weather station at CFD Station #18 on Daniel Island.

Chief Curia said they had weather stations across Charleston that helped with storm response, particularly for measuring wind speed, which helped them judge if it was safe to cross bridges.

On a motion of Councilmember Shealy, seconded by Councilmember Seekings, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the item above.

#### 5. Police Department: Approval of an Agreement between the City of Charleston and Charleston Dorchester Mental Health Center. The Agreement defines responsibilities incumbent upon both parties as part of the previously approved Connect and Protect Grant.

Steve Ruemelin said City Council had approved the acceptance of this grant in January. It was for a mental health clinician, a peer support specialist, and crisis intervention training. He said they currently had a mental health clinician that focused on domestic violence and victims of crime. This new clinician would be out in the field working more on crisis intervention and trying to get folks to the right places so that they wouldn't end up in the criminal justice system. Councilmember Shealy noted that the language read that the position would "provide services up to 40 hours a week." He questioned if it should say "services of 40 hours a week." Mr. Ruemelin said the intent was for 40 hours a week and that he would contact the organization to amend the language to reflect that. Councilmember Shealy also clarified that it would go into effect at the time of signing, not April 1<sup>st</sup>, as was listed on the agreement.

On a motion of Mayor Tecklenburg, seconded by Councilmember Shealy, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the item above.

**6. Police Department: Approval of 2023 Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Funding Program Grant for an after-the-fact submission of an application for the CESF grant in the amount of \$217,735 for computers and ancillary equipment to equip 15 police cruisers with mobile computer systems. The application was due May 6, 2022. There is no match required for this grant. However, there will be an ongoing annual operational expense of approximately \$60,000.**

Mr. Ruemelin said there was no match for the first year, but there would be a cost after that if they continued the service. Mayor Tecklenburg confirmed that these were MDTs and asked how many police cars they had left to outfit. Cassandra Payton said, if they continued the current replacement cycle, it would take 2 more years for every car to be outfitted with one.

On a motion of Councilmember Shealy, seconded by Mayor Tecklenburg, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the item above.

**7. Fire Department Update**

Chief Curia said the Fire Department's current issues were low morale, high vacancies, an increased call volume, a lack of diversity, a leadership vacuum, updating their strategic plan, and facilities. He said the morale issue was mostly from Covid fatigue and noted that they'd had 50 firefighters impacted by the Covid vaccine mandate. He said every Councilmember had heard about the pay, retention, and inflation issues. He said he was trying to make sure that folks in the department were aware of the decisions being made, even if they weren't the ones making them, and said they were trying to build a trusting, transparent environment. He reported that, in 2018, they had a 21% vacancy rate. In 2020, it was 9.3%, and now it was 13%. Most separations for personnel occurred within 0-4 years, closely followed by the 5-9 year range. Based on his personal experience, a typical vacancy rate should be around 5%. He noted that, during Covid, when the population was less mobile, CFD's call volume went down, but in 2021 they saw an 11% increase and were on track to see another 10% increase for 2022.

In positive trends, the City had retained its Class 1 Rating from the Insurance Services Office. He said that the 3 criteria evaluated for ratings were the dispatching system, the water distribution system, and fire protection. A 1-5 rating positively impacted insurance rates for businesses. He noted that CFD was also accredited through the Center for Public Safety Excellence and that there were very few fire

departments that enjoyed both a Class 1 Rating and accreditation from the Center for Public Safety Excellence. He said the Department's long term planning was going well and they were currently engaged in a project to make sure they could forecast needs and issues for 10-15 years out. He said other departments, like BFRC and Parks, were looped into the plan so they would know well in advance when a new apparatus or station update was needed. He also pointed out their very good relationship with CPD, which he thought was a testament to Chief Reynold's leadership. The best example of that was the Palms fire a couple months ago. For a fire of that magnitude, it was incredibly good news that there had been no casualties or injuries, which wouldn't have been possible without the good relationship between CFD and CPD.

Due to reduced funding in 2021, they had to retool how they approached special teams. As a result of that, they were now discovering there was a training gap with the hazardous material, urban search and rescue, and marine teams, so they were trying to find ways to entice new members to join, retain existing members, and find ways to make sure they could bridge that training gap. Another issue was the Fire Department pay plan. When he became Chief in July 2018, he assumed that the pay plan involved pay adjustments, but that was not the case. He thought the cost of living in the Charleston area was what was really driving the conversation. Firefighters had fluctuating work weeks – they worked 2 pay periods of a “long schedule” and one pay period of a “short schedule,” which resulted in different pay for different parts of a month. A new firefighter with a high school education would receive a net pay of around \$2,000/month. Given the cost of living, that pretty much just covered rent and didn't take into account food, car payments, insurance, etc. He said firefighters wanted to live in the City, but they were finding it difficult to do so. In respect to the leadership vacuum, they had 25 Chief Officers, of whom 67% had been promoted in the last 3.5 years. Most of the issues in the Fire Department were not related to fires being extinguished, they pertained to how people related to each other, spoke to each other, and handled disagreements. He noted the lack of diversity in the Fire Department was another issue. CFD was 92% white male, while Charleston was 72% white. They were focusing on increasing CFD's diversity to reflect the community they served and were trying to hire local talent with the thought that the more local folks they had, the better chance they had of retaining them. He had also created a diversity and recruitment position, which he hoped they would be able to fund later in the year with ARPA funds.

With respect to facilities, the Fire Department's training facility, logistics facility, and shop facility were all on Milford Street, which would be gone in a few years, so they were working with Parks to ensure CFD's needs would be provided for in the new municipal operations complex. He reported that they had land and an architect selected for Fire Station 23 on Johns Island and a budget request submitted for 15 firefighters to staff a ladder company at that station. The following year, they would request the additional 15 firefighters needed for an engine company. He noted that they had applied for a Federal grant, which would provide the firefighters at no cost, but they didn't know if they had been awarded that yet. He said the Cainhoy area was exploding with growth and, after long delays, they were finally in a position to rebuild Fire Station 20. It would take the facility in the worst condition and transform it into a state of the art facility. He said they had plans for Fire Station 22 further into Cainhoy, which would require 30 firefighters. He said they were working on a land donation so that, further down the road, when they needed to build Fire Station 24, it would be available. He said one of his focuses as Chief had

been on facilities and that, since 2018, many facilities had been improved. Stations 6 and 13 had received full renovations, Station 8 and 7 were scheduled to undergo renovations, Station 11 was in a new facility, Stations 12 and 16 had undergone small renovations, Station 14 had received significant roof work, and there was a small renovation planned for Station 18. He said there were plenty of good things going on in the Fire Department. All of their upper ranks were filled or would be in the next 2-3 weeks. He pointed out that during his presentation he hadn't touched on emergency responses, which was because their response times were good, the time it took to bring a fire under control was good, and the time it took to initiate CPR was good. He noted they had strong relationships with area fire departments and that they had trained 105 new firefighters in the 3.5 years he had been Fire Chief. However, if they couldn't retain firefighters, they were in a constant loop of training new folks and couldn't get to the work of advancing the skillset of existing firefighters.

Councilmember Shahid thanked Chief Curia for his leadership and said the issues he was tackling were not new ones. He asked Chief Curia what the current vacancies were. Chief Curia said there were 25-26 vacancies, which was around 9.3%. They had another Fire Academy scheduled for later in the summer, which would get them close to full complement. Councilmember Shahid asked for an update on Station 12. Chief Curia said most of the work had been done, but there was an issue with the flooring. They were working with Parks to get that resolved, and it would be just a few more weeks until firefighters were back in that station. Councilmember Shahid asked Chief Curia what his thoughts were on the usefulness of a Board of Fire Masters. Chief Curia said he had spoken with retired Assistant Chief Raymond Lloyd about that, whose experience had been that the entity became very political with Fire Masters trying to dictate operations and promotions. Chief Curia said it may not be useful right now, but he thought a citizen's advisory committee could be positive. He said firefighters were typically pretty rigid in their thought, so to take something like their current diversity issue and only have those experiencing the issue try to solve it would cause them to miss out on other perspectives. Councilmember Shealy thanked Chief Curia for his leadership and asked for an update on Fire Station 16. Chief Curia said that station just completed a small renovation. In the long term, the facility would have to be replaced, but the lot was not big enough to accommodate the station being torn down and a replacement being built, so they were actively looking for land. Mayor Tecklenburg thanked Chief Curia for his leadership and said his ears were open to hear even more about the pay and retention issues. He said the issues of pay and rising housing costs were issues for every City employee. He thanked him for his transparency in acknowledging the diversity issues the Fire Department faced and for his efforts to address them. He noted that the HR Committee would be meeting on Thursday to discuss the results of the pay study the Human Resources Department conducted and that City Council would have to deal with pay plans City-wide, just as they had done last year. He said if the Chief wanted to get a citizen's advisory board going, they should move forward with it. He thought that would be a very positive thing, just as it has been for the Police Department. Councilmember Shahid asked Chief Curia if it would be okay to separate CFD from the new Milford Street complex. Chief Curia said they didn't need to be connected to the other departments and that, long term, it would be best to condense all the Fire Department operations, aside from fire stations, in one complex. However, he said they needed to burn things to train firefighters, so that aspect would need to be removed from other City complexes.

## **8. Emergency Management Update**

Mr. Scaff said they had hired Shannon Whitehead to replace Mike Tito, who had left to pursue another career. He said the Cooper River Bridge Run was successful, although the numbers were not quite the same as before the pandemic. However, he thought they would continue to see numbers increase if the current Covid trend continued. He said he was working on rebuilding the incident management team and recruiting new folks to help prepare for, respond to, and recover from hurricanes. He said they had an earthquake exercise coming up that was led by Charleston County and they would do a partial activation of the MEOC to support that. He reported that they were still working on annexes for the Emergency Operations Plan, which he had presented to the Committee several months ago. Additionally, they were working on hazard mitigation, continuity of operations, and recovery plans. He added that several months ago they had attended a Homeland Security Summit hosted by the Mills House that covered recovery from a disaster or emergency in the Charleston area. In terms of hurricanes, he said it looked like it would be an average to slightly-above-average season. They had reactivated the hurricane taskforce to review bus stop locations around the City for evacuations and City-wide birthing and feeding plans, and they were working with law enforcement on sheltering security. He reported that Charleston County's availability for shelters had returned to pre-Covid numbers, which put them at about 3,500 available spaces across 6 shelters, all of which were for Category 3 and below. He noted that Berkeley County had several thousand spaces, too. He said the sandbag locations had been reviewed, there were 90,000 sandbags available, and the City's debris management sites had been approved by DHEC. He reported that hurricane outreach had started the previous weekend with staff distributing hurricane guides. He said this was important to do because they had people moving to the City every year who hadn't experienced a hurricane before and weren't aware of the risks involved.

Councilmember Shahid suggested using a site other than Sumar Street for sandbag distribution and having a team leader to help coordinate the activities on site.

Having no further business, the Committee adjourned at 3:02 p.m.

Andrea Derungs  
Clerk of Council's Office