

Public Safety Committee
August 16, 2022

A meeting of the Public Safety Committee was held on this date beginning at 2:03 p.m. at 80 Broad St. and over video conference call.

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

Present: Chairman Shahid, Mayor Tecklenburg (left at 5:16 p.m.), Councilmember Seekings, Councilmember Mitchell (arrived at 2:23 p.m.), and Councilmember Shealy

Staff: Chief Reynolds, Jason Krusen, Steve Ruemelin, Dustin Thompson Chief Curia, Sergeant Anthony Gibson, and Wanda Stepp recording.

1. Invocation

The meeting was opened with an invocation led by Chief Reynolds.

2. Deferral of Minutes

On a motion of Chair Shahid, seconded by Councilmember Shealy, the Committee voted unanimously to defer the minutes from the June 16, 2022, meeting.

3. Reinstitution of the Board of Fire Masters Discussion

Chief Curia said that the discussion was not to bring back the Board of Fire Masters, but to bring back an advisor to create an Advisory Committee made up of civilians and Councilmembers to assist the Fire Department with community outreach and diversity. Chapter 13 of the Code of Ordinances described the roles and responsibilities of the Board of Fire Masters. They aim to modify The Code so it could be applied to an advisory committee.

Councilman Shealy asked if they were looking for people with fire experience or anyone in the community for the Advisory Committee. Chief Curia said that bringing people without fire experience would enable them to explore the point of view of a resident of the Charleston Fire Department. He said that bringing people from the community would ensure that the intention of the Fire Department and the expectations of the public align. Councilmember Shahid said that the point of the Advisory Board was to get some input from the community and that they planned to work with the Legal Department about getting an ordinance reinstated.

Mayor Tecklenburg asked if the Advisory Committee would be similar to the Police Advisory Committee. Chief Curia said yes, the idea was to mirror what the Police Department had but to call it the Board of Fire Masters since that was the historical term for it. Mayor Tecklenburg suggested not using that title for the committee because it implied that the committee would only have people who had fire experience. Councilmember Shahid said that they didn't want to confuse the public about what they were trying to accomplish.

1. Fire Department Salary and Retention Discussion

Chief Curia said that the number one issue articulated to him when someone was leaving the Fire Department was the issue of pay. His goal was to make sure that the Charleston Fire Department became competitive with the region and stayed competitive.

Chief Curia showed a presentation on salary and retention. He said that morale has been an issue in the department for a long time and despite what they already did to raise it, the number one morale booster was an increase in wages. The pay also affected their retention rate of firefighters and what they must do to ensure that the fire apparatus was staffed. There was a discrepancy on whether they were focusing on annual salary or hourly rate. He said that what firefighters were being paid versus the cost of living in Charleston and what other fire departments were making needed to be a part of the conversation. For the Charleston Fire Department, employees in the 0–4 year range were leaving the quickest, followed by the 5–9 year range. Chief Curia said that this was an issue because they were in a constant training cycle for new employees, and the training staff didn't have time to do anything but train new firefighters. They were losing firefighters at the same pace it took to train someone with no firefighting background, and therefore it was difficult to decrease vacancies in the Operations Division. This led to burnout in the firefighters and a spike in leave usage.

Chief Curia said he was aware of talks about increasing the starting pay and the first couple of raises a firefighter could get. He first focused on the recruit pay for the firefighters which was \$35,987 and was not going to change. That was an issue because they were trying to close the gap between the hourly rate that an entry-level firefighter and a recruit made. He said that there should be a signing bonus of four or five thousand dollars offered to recruits. A new firefighter with a high school diploma made \$38,936. With the changes, they would make \$43,000. If a recruit firefighter graduated from the fire academy and entered the operations division, they would make \$3,000 more annually as an entry-level firefighter, however, their hourly rate would decrease from \$17.30 to \$12.88 an hour.

Councilmember Seekings asked if they should be thinking about the positions at every level as a salaried position or an hourly position. Chief Curia said that it would be an annual salary and that when they called other fire departments to ask what they paid their firefighters, they answered with annual pay. Councilmember Seekings said that while a recruit was making more than an entry-level firefighter on an hourly basis, the annual amount was more important because that was the number all City employees saw first. Chair Shahid said that these firefighters worked more demanding jobs and had longer shifts than the average City employee, so they couldn't be compared to one another. Chief Curia said that the average day for a firefighter involved training, hydrant maintenance, hazard checking buildings, studying for promotions, and answering calls which were steady 24 hours. Mayor Tecklenburg said that the annual salary should be the main focus because firefighters worked 56 hours a week, and that would cause the hourly rate to decrease.

Councilmember Seekings asked if they retrained recruits who already had fire experience. Chief Curia said yes, recruits with prior experience were put through a 10-week training course versus the 26-week training course for people with no experience. Chair Shahid said that if they had a \$17.30 hourly rate for an incoming firefighter, they would be making almost \$50,000 a year.

Chief Curia said over the last eight years the operations division pay for an entry-level firefighter with a high school diploma increased by \$2.15, and that was not on par with changes in the price of living in Charleston, for example, home prices went up 65%, and rent increased 132% in the same amount of time. He said firefighters had short checks and long checks depending on how many hours they worked. The gross income of short checks was \$1,237.52, and long checks was \$1,643. Councilmember Seekings asked why there would be a need for short and long checks if they paid people on a salary base bimonthly. Chief Curia said that having the short and long checks did add complexity to their work. Sometimes employees wouldn't get overtime on one of their checks because they got straight time instead of time and a half. That was the way FLSA treated firefighters. Councilmember Seekings said that the model was more complicated than it needed to be because time over could be captured in things like a quarterly reconciliation or a bi-annual reconciliation. Chief Curia said that they needed to talk to HR about pay leveling and to switch the conversation from an hourly rate to an annual salary.

Chief Curia stated that if the Charleston Fire Department continued to pay lower than other fire departments, firefighters that were hired would move to other departments like the Raleigh Fire Department which paid thousands higher. He said it was important to retain firefighters because their profession was one where experience could greatly increase the safety of the people they were protecting and the firefighters. Chief Curia said that it cost \$60,000 to train each firefighter, and with their pay scale, it took 8 years for them to break even. The pay adjustments they planned to put before City Council addressed the 0-4 year demographic of employees and would be a substantial help in raising the department's retention rate.

Councilmember Seekings asked where the employees that quit were going. Chief Curia said that if they were leaving the area, they were going to a different fire department, and if they stayed, which was not often, then they moved to private industry. He said in 2018 and 2019 a third of their firefighters weren't making it past their first year, meaning they spent \$60,000 worth of training for another department's benefit. He also said that the average turnover rate for the Charleston Fire Department was 9.2% while the average for other fire departments their size was 5.68%. The CFD was losing 30 people a year when they could only train 26 firefighters for one 6-month training period. There had also been an increase in leave usage because firefighters were experiencing burnout because they were understaffed. It has also led to fewer personnel signing up for volunteer opportunities and "forced" overtime shifts. Also, because of the pay issue, more firefighters had second jobs giving them less time for the City.

Chair Shahid asked what the retention rate was of other fire departments that paid more. Chief Curia said that the City of Raleigh's Fire Department had 50 vacant positions. He said that other fire departments in the area like North Charleston were also struggling with their retention rate. Chair Shahid said that he asked that because if other departments who paid more still had low retention rates, then perhaps there were other issues that should be looked at along with pay.

Chief Curia agreed and said that solution was looking at what other fire departments in the region offered in signing bonuses and health care, and raising the start pay at the CFD to the upper \$40's to better compete with them. Firefighters who reached top pay could get an increase based on the cost of living. Chief Curia said that the City needed to decide what percentile they

wanted to be in the market and adopt a plan that reviewed firefighter pay once every three years to ensure they were keeping up with the market. He said that once a year supervisors should meet with their teams to ascertain what was needed and what could be improved, and that information should be used as a roadmap to drive employee performance.

Councilmember Shealy asked what St. John's Fire Department was doing that allowed them to not suffer from the same retention problem as other fire departments in the area. Chief Curia said the only difference that he was aware of was that their start pay was 10%-15% more than others.

2. Police Department Salary and Retention Discussion

Mayor Tecklenburg said that they should skip to agenda Item seven which dealt with the police department's report on salary and retention. Chief Reynolds showed a presentation. He said that inflation and a rise in the cost of living had resulted in a very competitive labor market. He stated that to perform at the City of Charleston residents' standards, they needed to continue to invest in recruiting, hiring, training, equipping, and leading of their personnel, while retaining their personnel in the competitive labor market.

Chief Reynolds said that there were 115 professional staff positions in the Charleston Police Department, and their pay was behind. He continued by saying that the pay of anybody who was not a sworn policeman, which was about 25% of the department, was significantly underwhelming. He also said that the retention rate in their department was 25-30%. A table featured in the presentation showed that there was a 69% difference between what the professional staff was making versus the cost of living and a 23% difference between sworn-based staff and the cost of living.

Chief Reynolds then said the Police Department planned on continuing efforts with HR in restructuring both sworn and professional staff pay scales to ensure they matched the level of service expected and to work with HR towards implementing a professional staff pay plan.

Chief Reynolds said that there were many issues facing police and that they were under an intense level of scrutiny. He said that police officers faced complex issues and must handle public scrutiny whilst drug and gun crimes rose. He continued saying that they challenged police officers in response to the complex issues by adjusting their shifts, schedules, and time away. He also said that there had been an uptick in protests where police were mistreated, and there was a high standard the public held for the police.

Chief Reynolds said that the department was making progress with hiring new staff. They had 35 vacancies for sworn-in staff and fewer vacancies than that for non-sworn staff. He said when it came to the question of why people were leaving, it was because of salary. He said while salary was important, he believed there were also other reasons why people were leaving such as the culture, how they communicated, how they valued people, how they used technology, how they were implementing processes, and diversity.

Sergeant Gibson said that the Charleston Police Department was already taking steps to help their retention. He said their turnover was a product of their hiring processes and that selecting

and training the right people was imperative to retention. The Police Department had established internships and re-established their customer service experience. He said that the hiring process was revamped to be more streamlined, so they knew what they were looking for and how to get it. He said that hiring their way out of vacancies was not an efficient way to think. He said that it was more efficient to retain an employee than hire one because the training period lasted at least eight months.

Sergeant Gibson said they looked at two categories: decisions to leave and intentions to stay. The retention team held exit interviews to capture the data that identified why officers were leaving the agency and enforcement career altogether. The identification of those trends would allow the department to better understand the internal and external motivations for leaving the department and mitigate the immediate issues. He said that in 2022 they built a check-in program that captured critical information that would help them stay engaged with their employees and measure workplace factors and retention. Those check-ins provided them with a cross-sectional view into the mindset of current employees, something the exit interviews couldn't do. He said what they did as a police agency was risk management meaning they had always looked at deterrence versus prevention both internally and externally. As a result of the exit interviews and check-ins, they discovered that compensation was one of the most critical aspects of retaining and hiring an employee. However, the work environment, career development, job satisfaction, organizational support, and cost of living also affected the retention rate. Therefore, they attempted to establish the boundaries of compensation and where everything else played a part. Their goal was to not have the same conversation about adjusting compensation for retention issues in five years.

Sergeant Gibson stated that the average annual turnover since 2014 was 11% or 44 officers per year. Chief Reynolds said that their turnover rate should be half of what it was currently. He said they were only hiring the best people for the job and not just filling vacancies.

Sergeant Gibson said that taking an evidence-based approach would be the first way to tackle retention issues. He said that they needed to know why they were going to do what they were going to do and that a hasty generalization could incorrectly describe retention concerns. The retention teams were tasked with looking at the evidence and data to create an impactful and sustainable retention-focused practice and model. He said extensive research was occurring to analyze the strengths and limitations of their retention efforts because they were trying to reinforce the employee commitment to the organization and successfully focus on employee-directed efforts through evidence-based practice. He said that improving the retention rate was not an event and was a process that the department couldn't accomplish by themselves. Charleston Police Department's retention team included lead scholars, and they had collaborated with researchers from Kent State University and the University of Cincinnati through the American Society of evidence-based policing to create a large-scale powerful retention solution. He said that retention in law enforcement was extremely complex and involved wide-ranging professional and personal characteristics intertwined with what it meant to be an employee at their agency.

Sergeant Gibson said that phase one of addressing retention issues was completed in June 2020, and it was a survey with their officers that looked at where workplace factors influenced officers'

intentions to stay or leave. The result of the survey showed that compensation was simultaneously the number one reason why employees stayed and the number one reason why they left. It also showed that there was a correlation between addressing employee needs and organizational support, so compensation had boundaries in terms of non-monetary motivations for officers to stay. It was found that officers who felt like their higher organization needs were being met thought that their salary was fair. Sergeant Gibson added that attrition was not singular, and accumulated over time.

Sergeant Gibson said that phase two of addressing retention issues was to look retrospectively at the department's hiring data to identify any predictors of attrition so they could create an intervention to stop the officers before they left. This would be a proactive step to mitigate their attrition concerns and discover if any were preventable.

Sergeant Gibson said that phase three of addressing retention issues would be to conduct a follow-up of everything. They were constantly looking at it and ensuring that their intervention strategies worked. He said that the goal of using valid information was to create a plan to regularly assess and adapt for retention issues.

Chief Reynolds said that the next step for the Police Department was to work with their first-line supervisors with different levels of leadership in the organization to identify and implement solutions for internal factors impacting attrition. They also planned to work with no-cost partnerships, experts, HR, and BFRC to identify solutions for problems impacting attrition such as compensation and position classifications. He also said they would continue to work towards keeping the department at the forefront of the industry nationally while monitoring and mitigating impacts associated with cost-of-living trends.

Chair Shahid thanked them for the presentation. He stated that they could not overemphasize the need for a successful Police and Fire department. He said public safety was a noble profession and the number one responsibility of a city. He said that there had been a cultural shift and that both Chiefs were smart for getting ahead of the curve. He said that properly vetting new employees was important to ensure that they would be a good fit for the job and continue doing that job for the next several years. He added that attrition was natural as people moved and grew as time moved on, but they never wanted employees to leave because they were sick of the job or couldn't handle it anymore.

3. Discussion on Mutual Aid with Charleston County Sheriff's Office and Memorandum of Understanding between Charleston Police Department and The Federal Bureau of Investigation

The Committee voted to take items five and six together. Mr. Ruemelin said Item five was an update to an already existing agreement for the Metro Martine Patrol. Since the context of the agreement had changed over the years, they were updating it to reflect current personnel. Item six was a renewal of an already existing agreement with the Federal Bureau of Investigation Low Country Violent Crimes Task Force. They were making an addendum that provided they could pay overtime compensation to the members of the Police Department who were on the task force depending on Federal funding.

Chair Shahid asked how many people the Charleston Police Department had on the Federal Task Force. Mr. Ruemelin said that there were two on the task force. Chair Shahid said that he and Judge Bruce Hendricks were the first organizers of the Violent Crime Task Force created in the 1990s and that it was great to have the City Police Department then because they sent two people from the Sheriff's Office to the task force. He said that he believed that the people assigned to the task force get a lot of experience.

On a motion of Chairman Shahid, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the Mutual Aid Agreement with Charleston County Sheriff's Office and an MOU between the Charleston Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

4. Discussion on Street Flooding Closure Procedures

Deputy Thompson showed a presentation. He said that much of what he would talk about was the actions they had been taking for the last 18 months to address street flooding. He said that they were working closely with Emergency Management, but wanted to make it a City-wide event. He said that Emergency Management had been helping the department get organized for flooding events, but non-known flooding events were an issue. Part of the preparation for known events with Emergency Management was that they had staff on standby for 12-hour shifts and a virtual PSOC. He also said that in known flooding events, firefighters would have their swift water boats prepared, flood stats had been about life safety, and they wanted to get the roads closed as quickly as possible.

Deputy Thompson shared that they redid their flooding field guide internally so they could get everyone on the same page with their flooding response. The department had identified 47 closures that needed to happen whenever there was significant rainfall and noted that they were mostly in Harleston Village. He said that they had identified five locations that always flooded on a king tide with no rain, and officers went to those locations and closed them before the tide hit.

Deputy Thompson said that there were bicycle barricades placed around town and that the department, the Mayor, and the Council weren't fond of them. He said that they had prep to do in the future because bicycle barricades were not a good long-term plan. He said they had a tracking spreadsheet that showed where all the barricades were and put more up where there were more complaints. They gave all their teams' high-water vehicles for known flooding events, and their purpose was to save stranded motorists.

Deputy Thompson said that almost all their command was trained in GIS road mapping so they could have commanders mapping roads and the public and media would know where those closures were. They had started tweeting out a link to their GIS site instead of sending out tweets about every single road closure. He said that all departments made reports once or twice a year on their efforts for flooding. They had looked at data from three years prior to see how many flooded vehicles were reported and where they could pre-stage fire and police in those areas to avoid life safety issues and rescues.

Deputy Thompson said the Sustainable Flooding Response Plan was put in place so that every time there was a flooding event the involved departments had resources and plans in place. He said that included permanent traffic detour options, message boards, flood alerts, dedicated trailers for flooding response, and tri-level DOT standard barricades. He said that they had requested three lighting towers, as well.

Chair Shahid said that they knew what streets flooded and when there was a king tide or rain bomb. He said that they were trying to get ahead of these events and notify the public swiftly and continuously. He asked what mechanism they used to notify the public. Deputy Thompson said they used social media but previously used message boards. Chair Shahid said that they could use alerts if people signed up for them and that colleges had success using those alerts to share news with their students. Deputy Thompson said that they had had discussions on using the alerts with the Neighborhood Services Division about every other month, but nothing had been decided, and they still used social media as their main mechanism.

Councilmember Gregorie said that he thought the presentations were informative and that all the departments should do something similar to that where they told the Council what they needed and how to get there.

5. Adjournment

There being no further discussion, the Committee adjourned at 3:44 p.m.

Jasmine O'Neal
Clerk of Council Office