

ENGAGE GWINNETT  
FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES REPORT  
Status Quo

Appreciation to Fire and Emergency Management Services (EMS) Staff

Our work would have been very difficult and our information incomplete without the full cooperation and willing participation of the Fire Chief and staff throughout the Fire and EMS Department. We recognize that the time spent in working with the Engage Gwinnett process took staff away from their normal duties, which still had to be performed. We commend the Fire and EMS staff for their openness and responsiveness to our many requests and questions and for the patience they demonstrated as we tried to understand the Department's plans and operations.

Approach to Examination of Fire and EMS

As we started our review, Fire and EMS provided us with an overview of the Department through presentations by staff members responsible for leading different functional areas. These presentations allowed an initial dialogue with staff and enabled us to develop some general knowledge of the Department and its operations. We were also able to discuss in detail with staff plans for future expansion of the Department's stations, equipment and staffing designed to meeting the growing and changing needs of the community.

Based on these presentations, we developed a list of additional information and questions to be addressed. This sharing of information continued as an iterative process throughout our review. We also reviewed documents and reports, toured Fire headquarters, observed the Department's monthly performance meeting (FireStat), and continued our dialogue with the leadership of the Department.

In addition to the review work that we performed ourselves, we requested that the designated research staff from the County and from Georgia Gwinnett College investigate three questions related to the Fire and EMS Department. We appreciate their assistance in addressing these questions:

- What is the financial impact of a change in the County's Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating?
- What would be the net financial impact of privatizing the EMS transport services?
- Is there an opportunity to leverage our internal training and provide EMS training for profit to surrounding departments?

The results of these research projects were very useful in helping us to draw conclusions about certain operational issues and in supporting intuitive assessments with data and figures. The research is discussed at relevant points later in this report. The work done by the Economic Analysis Office was particularly noteworthy in quantifying the answers to the three questions we posed.

## Observations

- We were immediately struck by the high quality services provided by the Department in the following areas:
  - Fire protection
  - Fire prevention and safety education
  - Fire Marshal
  - Life safety and handicapped access code enforcement and inspections
  - Fire investigations
  - Emergency medical
  - Emergency management
- The Department, per the adopted 2010 budget, has about 850 positions. Of these, over 60 are vacant, and the recruitment process to fill the vacancies is underway.
- The Department's 2010 operating budget totals about \$76.0 million and represents almost 15% of the County's General Fund Budget. Fire and EMS operations are funded primarily from property taxes, but substantial funds are collected in conjunction with ambulance transport fees. These fees, projected to amount to almost \$11.0 million in 2010, serve to offset a portion of the cost of EMS.
- As evidenced by the research report prepared for us on the possibility of providing training to other Fire departments for profit, it is difficult to impose fees or otherwise generate income through most of the Department's activities.
- Fire and EMS employees are well-trained and well-equipped. They generally display a professional attitude and high morale.
- Numerous reductions and operational changes intended to generate cost containment have already been instituted. Some examples of these include the privatization of billing and collections, consolidation of warehouse operations and reduction in support staff positions.
- The Department has implemented a formalized process for frequent self-evaluation of its operations, using statistics and other objective reporting mechanisms.
- The majority, 70% or more, of the Department's calls for service are medical in nature. Structure fires account for only a very small portion of the calls. The shift toward medical calls as the primary source of calls for service began years ago and continues even now.
- The Department instituted at least two decades ago a practice of cross-training firefighters and paramedics/EMT's. This cross-training creates greater staffing flexibility and allows the Department to operate with fewer staff per piece of equipment, which is less expensive overall. Adequate staff are delivered to incident scenes by sending more equipment units; this is the reason why multiple units are often dispatched to the same incident.

- With over 90% of the operating funds for Fire and EMS devoted to personnel costs, any meaningful reduction of the Department's budget would affect staff in one way or another.
- Fire protection ratings are assigned to communities by the Insurance Service Office (ISO). These ratings are based on factors such as staffing, equipment and availability of adequate water flow and are considered by insurers in setting property insurance premiums. If ISO awards a better rating to a community, then this typically will result in reduced insurance costs while a worse rating likely will generate higher insurance costs.
- As evidenced in the public participation meetings, the public values Fire and EMS as a priority service of the County and sees the Department as performing well. Maintaining the current level of service in Fire and EMS was commonly mentioned as a concern, and there seemed to be an overall belief, with few exceptions, that Fire and EMS ought to be one of the last County departments to undergo budget cuts.

#### Challenges and considerations

- Response times are good, meeting national standard about half of time. Response times are affected by each of the factors shown below, which complicates attempts to maintain and/or improve response times:
  - Stations and geographic area covered
  - Staffing and equipment
  - 911 call handling and dispatch
  - Road network and congestion
  - Adequate water flow
- The tendency of adverse economic conditions to generate increased service demands must be considered as budget decisions are made. For example, individuals may postpone seeking medical care until there is an emergency need, resulting in an ambulance call rather than a visit to a doctor's office.
- As noted earlier, any meaningful cost reduction for Fire and EMS would impact staff. Any reduction in staff numbers or work schedules would likely negatively affect the response time and service delivery of the Department.
- Demographic changes that have already occurred and that will continue in the future have a major effect on the demands for Fire and EMS services, as well as the ability of the Department to deliver services to all segments of the community. Chief among these demographic changes are an aging population and increasing diversity.
- Service demands and delivery are also impacted by land use changes, particularly densification and urbanization, and by the aging and deterioration of housing and commercial buildings. Other examples of planned or potential changes which would generate substantial

service demands include the addition of dormitories at Georgia Gwinnett College and expanded services at the Gwinnett County Airport.

### Major recommendations

- We are very cautious in recommending changes because we are concerned about unintended consequences. Therefore, we recommend that all proposed changes in the funding and operations of Fire and EMS be subjected to an intense review and analysis process which fully exams all possible consequences and balances the projected benefits with the potential risk associated with the proposed changes.
- Our priority recommendation is to continue the good work underway by the Department and to maintain the current service levels.
- Maintain the Department's current practice of providing emergency medical transport services. As determined by research performed by the Economic Analysis Office and staff from Georgia Gwinnett College, eliminating ambulance crews from the Department's staffing plan would actually increase the overall cost of providing Fire and EMS services. (For more information, refer to the "Fire and Emergency Services Committee Research Report" on the Engage Gwinnett website.)
- In addition to comparing against itself over time, we recommend that the Department identify appropriate communities and fire departments to use for benchmarking purposes. Comparisons with these peer communities and organizations should be an on-going and formalized process. While we acknowledge that such comparisons are difficult and imperfect, we believe that it is important to demonstrate how Gwinnett County Fire and EMS stacks up against other departments across the country.
- Identify and evaluate best practices from other progressive Fire departments, including how these departments are addressing cuts in funding.
- Focus immediate attention on preparation for the upcoming ISO rating process, which we understand is eminent. Once ISO has released its updated rating and related evaluation comments, use these as one source of information to identify areas where efforts should be concentrated in the future.
- Utilize the research report prepared for this Committee to explain the potential financial impacts on homeowners and businesses of ISO rating changes, as well as to compare these with budgetary increases required to maintain/improve existing ISO rating. Have this research performed annually, so that up-to-date information is available each year. Publish the annual research results in a manner that makes them easily available to the public.
- As funding allows, add stations, equipment and staffing to maintain and improve coverage across the County, especially in areas with higher response times or greater service demands.

- Focus on efforts to reduce community risk through education and outreach; expand use of volunteers and coordination with other organizations in order to make the most of available resources and to reach the greatest number of people.
- Address outdoor burning issue through education initially, but consider the possibility of more stringent regulation where warranted based on risk.
- Proceed in timely fashion with the re-write of existing code(s) and regulations to clarify and simplify their use by staff, regulated parties and the public.
- Identify and assess code adjustments likely to have the greatest impact on fire risk and management. The benefits to be derived from strengthening code requirements should be balanced with the cost to property owners and the community.
- Evaluate existing level of cooperation between Fire Marshall's Office and Planning and Development Department and identify any areas where change may be beneficial to the departments or their customers.
- Consider increasing frequency of fire hydrant inspection and maintenance.
- Search for other opportunities for outsourcing and contracting functions; evaluate these to determine viability and benefits.