

## When is it Acceptable to Reduce Fire Department Resources?

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That's my rhetorical question to Firegeezzer blogger Mike Ward, in response to this thoughtful posting titled [Neither a Scapegoat Nor Soundbite](#). See the comments, eight so far. Great piece and with six points of what municipal firefighters should do in these tough economic times.

1. Learn your budget: the income, expenditures, and the process.
2. Fight rhetoric and soundbites with facts.
3. Avoid a perception of entitlement.
4. Think the unthinkable.
5. Have a personal plan B.
6. Engage in the messy local democratic process.

Mind you, we're faring pretty good (or comparatively good) for fire department funding in these parts. But his perspective is useful no matter your situation. Because resources are always required. The money must come from somewhere. Read, discuss. Happy Friday.

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Heard yesterday that the City of Allen Town, Michigan sent layoff notices to their ENTIRE Fire Department. Not good.

**Jake T.** - 02/25/11 - 11:24

where the Fire department is concerned, no city should ever reduce it's staff. you should provide every possible resource you can. cut anywhere else but do not mess with public safety. if you cut public safety, you quite simply put the public's safety at risk.

**charlie** - 02/27/11 - 11:35

Interesting question. And no doubt, a lot of communities across the country will be asking that very same question in the coming months and years as our country trudges through these challenging economic times. As a public safety provider I, as well as many of the readers and posters on this board, know the importance of having well equipped, trained, and staffed emergency response units available. As our economy continues to slide, the calls will go up and it is important to have the resources. But the revenues will continue to drop as tax revenue declines. So who is going to make up the difference?

No one wants their taxes to go up. No one wants new taxes. So that leaves cuts. Big cuts. To all services provided by the government. And unfortunately, the tax increases will come as well.

So where do you cut?

For every one person who says "don't cut the fire service, EMS or law enforcement", I'll find you two that say don't cut the libraries, parks, and social services. Do you cut Medicaid? Sure, there is a lot of abuse, but I know of several folks with genuine needs who depend on it. Do we cut my mother's Social Security or Medicare? She earned it. Do we cut veteran's benefits? Tell that to the folks who fought in WW II, Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq, and Afghanistan who have service connected disabilities who depend on them.

Our communities depend upon federal and state dollars to maintain infrastructure. But that revenue is going to dry up. The Stimulus Package? What a joke. Fact is, local governments are going to have to pick up the tab. And state government is going to have to pick up the tab for things that traditionally the federal government pays for. It's a vicious cycle.

Fact is, not only are communities going to have to ask that question, a lot of communities are going to have to answer it as well. And quite frankly, we are going to have to (hopefully) find ways to reduce our numbers and resources without "too critically" affecting our ability to provide our services.

Cuts may be coming to a community near you. How those cuts are managed will be interesting to see.

**DJ** - 02/27/11 - 12:30

I am guessing that someone, sometime, has developed a flexible model of fire department levels, that shows a sliding scale of "what can be done" (or is intended to be done) based on availability of resources. Wartime firefighting comes to mind as an extreme example. If you are facing the threat (or actuality of) bombings, then tactical priorities are probably going to shift. As will the infrastructure. You'll enlist civilians as auxiliary corps, you'll develop strategies for new types of water supply, you'll use just-enough rather than more-than-enough designs for apparatus, etc.

Map the nation's municipal departments by economic impact— or maybe the big city departments— and I wonder what tactical differences you'd find. Company ops and daily activities in Detroit, for example, are certainly different, say, Chicago. Or maybe parts of Detroit compared to parts of Chicago? Then compare to, say, Gary, IN, or, lately, Camden, NJ. Not sure how you'd compare apples to oranges to pineapples in these cases, but it's an interesting (if fatalistic?) thought exercise.

**Legeros** - 02/27/11 - 12:55

DJ poses a valid point that many of us here cannot completely comprehend or even digest. Most citizens do not think about public safety until needed; therefore they are more inclined to risk the service based on the statistics and focus on the "fun" items related to a more social existence. Naturally, we are more intuitive about public safety and the needs. So, it is possibly a model of "Risk vs. Actual need"??? I can easily see the realities of reduction if I step completely out of the public safety role. We do have a lot of perceived redundancy in our systems and a citizen may not understand the response goals "we" strive to achieve. The elected officials are citizens. My stomach is a little queezy now...

**A.C. Rich** - 02/27/11 - 13:16

Sliding scale? Interesting idea. If there is such a thing I doubt it is 'public knowledge'. When I look at the fire service over the years, I think back to all of the texts and articles that I have seen regarding tactics. I can only remember one series in one of the journals back in the early 80s called "Single Company Operations". The articles were written on the premise of limited personnel. I wish I had saved them.

I guess another question could be do we wait until we are cut (and possibly painfully so) or offer up (less painful) cuts ahead of time?

Straying a little bit, or maybe not, how do we operate 'leaner'? When I was in Maryland a lot of our trucks were re-furbs. The 1985 E-One I rode was actually a Ward LaFrance from the 60s. Is that a realistic answer for the years to come? I doubt we are going to have some miraculous economic recovery like some believe, so should we look once again at refurbishing our apparatus? What about remounting ambulances? I know there are some that are against it, but economic realities may prevail. How do we ensure we are able to meet our mission requirements while saving money at the same time? I know there are some businesses that do nothing but refurbish Ford Crown Victorias for police departments.

One EMS agency I used to work for refurbished our carry-in bags to make them last. Another repaired uniforms rather than replace them. Is it cheaper to repair and refurbish turnout gear rather than to replace it?

Maybe not the best ideas in the world, but if we look at them seriously maybe we can keep local governments from having to decide how many firefighters, paramedics, and police officers to cut...

**DJ** - 02/27/11 - 13:34

AC, all of our stomachs should be a little queezy right now. You are right, it will be hard to explain all of the redundancy to John Q. Citizen who has an up-close-and-personal relationship with the parks, the libraries, and such, but sees two ambulances, an APP, and a fire truck at his neighbors house as wasteful.

Again, do we wait and see or do we become pro-active?

**DJ** - 02/27/11 - 13:42

Right-sizing. What does right-size emergency services look like, particularly when facilities and equipment and staffing and such were developed over years and decades, factoring both planned and actual growth and resources and revenues, and which may or may not have played out as planned.

What does a right-size Wake County fire service look like? Does it/would it/will it resemble, say, the TriData model that was presented years ago?

I believe the Wake County Manager suggested a year (or more) ago, to county departments, to look at mergers and as forward (better?) model for operation. Was he thinking right-sizing then?

**Legeros** - 02/27/11 - 13:49

Or, if you prefer, can we/should we attempt a discussion of what a right-size Wake County fire service looks like? Can it be discussed in a civil and sensible fashion? Do you pair bean-counters with white helmets? Is it a citizen panel plus a professional panel? Do you air the issues in public, or do you necessarily keep them quiet, hidden, planned and filed until emergency use. Transparency is awfully good, but is this an exception where it would end up as a free-for-all? You know what happens when the "C" word is said. Cuts.

**Legeros** - 02/27/11 - 13:59

I don't see how you can say public safety budgets are off limits. Because something is considered a necessity does not mean that it's cost effective or well run, thus in some cases there will be things that can be changed to be more cost effective or cut entirely.

Is it worth more for the FD to have the latest and greatest trucks or is there a better balance between refurbishing apparatus and not closing down a library or laying off roadway repair crews? There's a balance that has to be struck, sure not having the greatest truck may mean it takes a little longer to get a stream setup up or something, what's the risk associated with that? Is keeping other public service open worth increasing the risk to property by a small amount?

Look at the APP program. Could it have been more cost effective to use QRV's like have been used in the past? Instead of purchasing new sports cars, would it have been better to use the same SUV's that the majority of supervisors were already used to? If you keep the same vehicle types you limit the number of spare parts you need to keep on hand to a few types and can use the same mechanics. You would also have better familiarity with maintenance needs which allows for better preventative maintenance and less man hours spent on figuring out how to better handle the new vehicles. Training for the new employees, while made a good photo op, wouldn't have been needed since most would have been familiar with current supervisor SUV QRV's and current training plans could be used. More hypothetically, could accidents involving these sports cars have been avoided by using the older QRV's. Perhaps the operators would have been more accustomed to the older vehicles and switching to smaller, much harder to see due to the extremely low height caused the drivers around the EMS worker to have difficulty seeing and moving out of the way. Could this have prevented some of these accidents? Would it have been more prudent to stay with a well tested and understood system than switch it up in the middle of a budget crisis?

Many of these same things apply to how medium duty chassis ambulances were purchased. Same issues of parts, preventative maintenance and so forth as above. And now they've switched back over to truck based ambulances on a completely different chassis. I'm not saying don't buy new things, and don't have progressive change, but maybe financially risky bets like buying sports cars for EMS workers and medium duty ambulances should be avoided during financially turbulent times.

These are a couple examples of ways spending could have been curtailed by equipment choice alone. Teachers are being laid off, schools and libraries are being closed throughout the country and I fail to see why public safety budgets should be off limits.

**Joey** - 02/27/11 - 14:56

Also it can be added in, how much money can be saved if you go back to purchasing truck companies without the waterway? Go back to running a 3" line up the ladder. You can also look at the county doing like the City of Raleigh does and many other depts do, that being after 5 years or so send the engine out to a slower dept where it can be made to last longer. Of course those depts, just like individual stations always say "well we don't ever get a new truck", but how much money or jobs are you helping save by doing that.

**Mike** - 02/27/11 - 17:40

Let me throw this out there too. In my county there was a department that bought a brand new E-One 95' tower even though two other depts that they regularly run mutual aid with already had a 95' tower and a 75' stick. And is there really a need to have 3 reserve engines and 3 reserve tankers when you only run out of 3 stations? Yes, reserve units, not front-line. I believe certain depts have had it too good while others struggle to make ends meet using outdated turn-out gear and old worn out trucks in the same county. If you absolutely need a ladder truck, why not buy used instead of wasting the taxpayers money on a \$900,000 truck that maybe will see 50-100 responses a year. What a misuse of funds

**firefighter/taxpayer** - 02/27/11 - 22:39

Mike L. – I think the county manager wasn't looking at right-sizing with service in mind back then... just sheer cost savings. I believe in order to set the "new bar," the measure must be developed by someone other than an existing WC emergency services manager. If a current organizational chief were to streamline or "right-size," they would be praised by the elected officials and chastised by the rank and file. So, in order for this level of change to occur, a lot of weight must be pushed from above. Another perspective – Every emergency responder can look within their organization and see where cuts may be made – no matter what the service. But at "what cost to \_\_\_\_\_" (insert effected party).

So, we eternally beg the question that we all are hesitant to answer due to the personal effects it has on us due to our individual interests. As long as we the "operators" set the standards, we will continue to require more from the system "users" (aka customers).

**A.C. Rich** - 02/28/11 - 00:58

Next question, what happens with times are fat versus times are lean? Should agencies self-police, and try to operate leaner or just... "less fat" at all times? I guess the answer to that is probably "duh," but emergency services include private organizations contracted by governments. If you are a private fire department with a rich tax district and minimal government, there are no safeguards to prevent buying and operating with "more" than is perhaps needed. This sounds like something I've read about in the northeast, where departments have palaces and huge rigs, due to bounty of riches from taxes. Think were was investigation a couple years ago in... Jersey? Mass? Where was that.

**Legeros** - 02/28/11 - 08:45

...should read: with a rich tax district and minimal GOVERNANCE

**Legeros** - 02/28/11 - 09:04

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