

Tribune

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'Doomsday' predicted for Mesa fire services

By Lindsay Butler
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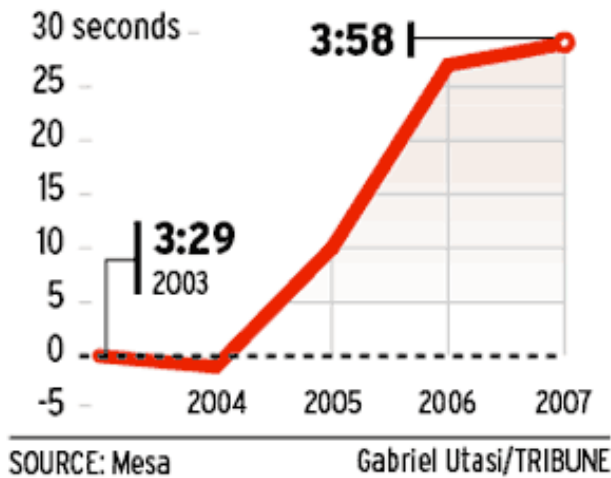
With budget cuts affecting his department, Mesa Fire Chief Harry Beck see's no relief in site as Mesa is already short four stations and fifty-two firefighters nessessary to maintain service levels to the city's growing population.

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Taking time

Without new resources, residents may continue to see increases in response times from Mesa Fire Department.

Change in response time



Mesa is short at least four fire stations and 52 firefighters necessary to maintain current service levels and is facing a dire situation as the city's population ages and continues to grow, fire Chief Harry Beck told city leaders Thursday.

Beck told the City Council during a budget presentation the department is severely underfunded to serve a city the size of Mesa, but stopped short of calling for a property tax to support it.

"It's my responsibility to run the fire department," Beck said. "I'm not an expert on how to finance the city."

Beck said it would be the responsibility of the council to decide how the city should pay for its services.

The presentation sparked a debate between outgoing and incoming council members, with Councilman-elect Alex Finter calling for an immediate secondary property tax.

The fire department's projections come on the heels of similar news from the Mesa Police Department, which predicted strained resources across the city.

However, police Chief George Gascon did tell the council a couple of weeks ago a property tax would be a more stable way to fund public safety.

District 2 Councilman Mike Whalen, a former police officer, called the reports from public safety officials "doomsday" scenarios.

"I don't see this community stepping forward to fund these things," Whalen said. "We can talk and talk and talk. Nobody seems to be listening."

Vice Mayor Claudia Walters said Mesa residents would have to be satisfied with the level of service they get.

"People get what they pay for," she said. "We're used to getting a free lunch."

As part of the city's financial crisis, the fire department will be cutting about \$2.7 million from its proposed \$64.3 million budget next year.

The cuts will include six fire inspectors, one recruit academy and the transitional response vehicle program, designed to answer minor calls and free up other fire resources.

And without additional resources, Beck estimated average fire department response times would increase by 15 seconds a year.

"We are saturated," he said. "There is no slack left in the system."

Beck said the department would have to add one new fire team every year just to meet current demand, and even more to actually improve service.

And the situation is likely to get worse, with aging baby boomers requiring more calls for service, a continually growing city and situations such as the closing of two west Mesa hospitals.

"I can't emphasize enough the unbelievable surge we are about to experience in Mesa with emergency services," Beck said.

Finter called the proposed cuts and gloomy predictions "unacceptable."

Finter, who will take Whalen's seat on the council, placed responsibility on the current council to find an immediate solution and vote on a secondary property tax.

The tax would be used to pay for current bond debt, freeing up at least \$25 million this year.

"This is unacceptable. You can find four votes, and the city manager can get the funding they need to get this done," he said. "Don't stick the new council with this burden."

The bond proposal on the November ballot includes funding \$79.9 million in fire department projects, including four new stations, land acquisition, traffic signal equipment and station renovations.

November's proposal also includes provisions for a secondary property tax, which can be used only for bond debt.

The council could decide to enact a secondary property tax without approval from the voters, Finter said.

"I'm calling you out right now in front of everybody," he said.

Mayor Keno Hawker shifted the onus back to the incoming council members, saying they will be reviewing the bond package before the election and will have a chance to find solutions there.

Walters agreed, saying the newly elected officials, set to take office June 2, have to take responsibility.

"Own the job, own the problem," she said.

Walters also said she was concerned that the council would lose credibility by enacting a property tax now instead of waiting for voter approval.

Valley fire departments compared


Mesa's population is increasing, yet budget concerns are preventing the city from adding more firefighters and other resources to address the increased need.

City	Population	Number of stations	Firefighters per 1,000 residents	Incidents
Mesa	461,806	17	.81	53,335
Apache Junction	31,281	4	.82	7,198
Tempe	165,000	6	1.1	18,680
Gilbert	209,000	9	1.2	12,047
Chandler	249,532	10	1.3	15,677

SOURCE: Mesa

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