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Mesa fire's efficiency plan hits roadblock

By Garin Groff
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Mesa is facing a frustrating Catch-22 that could lead to increased fire response times even as the city has a plan to become more efficient.

The city's fire chief last week told crews that a pending budget cut and shrinking staff will mean fewer fire trucks can be on the streets, and it will likely take longer to respond to emergencies.

In April, the City Council approved an effort that would dispatch smaller crews on low-priority calls while ensuring that traditional four-person crews responded to others.

But the more efficient model involved the fire department breaking away from the city's dispatch center, and that required some new equipment and specialized training. The city put that effort on a temporary hold as it figured out whether it could afford it at a time when the city may be forced to cut its budget by up to 10 percent.

City leaders say they are determined to change their response system but don't yet know whether they'll have the money.

"It takes an up-front investment to develop this better system," said Councilman Scott Somers, who is also a Phoenix firefighter.

The training is especially important, he said, because dispatchers have to know when a smaller crew is appropriate. A two-person crew wouldn't have the manpower - or some higher levels of medical knowledge - to assist people with life-threatening conditions. Dispatchers would have to know what questions to ask 911 callers so they can send the right crews to incidents, Somers said.

The expense would be modest, he said, but the city isn't sure of the exact amount.

"You can't just throw this out there," Somers said. "It just won't work. People will get hurt."

Most large cities also have separate dispatch centers for fire calls because police and fire calls each require their own specialized areas of knowledge.

Councilman Dennis Kavanaugh said he's interested in a more efficient dispatch system through his work as chairman of the Public Safety Committee. But with at least 20 firefighters planning to leave by summer 2011, Kavanaugh said the city might not have the staffing flexibility to develop more efficient operations. The effort might have to wait until the economy picks up, he said, despite strong support for the approach.

"It will help in terms of better use of resources," Kavanaugh said.

The city will develop its next budget in the next two months, and part of that will involve looking at the expense of the fire dispatch changes. The fire department is looking to cut all kinds of costs, including fire prevention. Somers said the fire department has proven itself innovative, but he said he doesn't see many more areas to trim.

"I don't know how much nonessential stuff we have left," Somers said.



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