

BUDGET REVIEW COMMITTEE

JUNE 8, 2022

A meeting of the Budget Review Committee was held Wednesday, June 8, 2022, at 7:00 p.m. in the Aldermanic Chamber and via Zoom which meeting link can be found on the agenda and on the city's website.

Alderman Michael B. O'Brien, Sr., Acting Chairman, presided.

Let's start the meeting by taking a roll call attendance. If you are participating via Zoom, please state your presence, reason for not attending the meeting in person, and whether there is anyone in the room with you during this meeting, which is required under the Right-To-Know Law.

Members of Committee present: Alderman Richard A. Dowd, Chairman (arrived at 7:18 p.m.)
Alderman-at-Large Michael B. O'Brien, Sr.
Alderman John Cathey
Alderman Ernest Jette
Aldermoman-at-Large Shoshanna Kelly
Alderman John Sullivan
Alderman-at-Large Lori Wilshire

Also in Attendance: Alderman-at-Large Melbourne Moran, Jr.
Steve Buxton, Fire Chief
William Atkinson, Assistant Fire Chief
Karen Conde, Executive Assistant

ROLL CALL

PUBLIC COMMENT - None

COMMUNICATIONS - None

UNFINISHED BUSINESS - None

NEW BUSINESS – RESOLUTIONS - None

NEW BUSINESS – ORDINANCES - None

TABLED IN COMMITTEE

**MOTION BY ALDERWOMAN KELLY TO REMOVE FROM THE TABLE R-22-035
MOTION CARRIED**

R-22-035

Endorsers: Mayor Jim Donchess
Alderman-at-Large Michael B. O'Brien, Sr.
Alderman John Sullivan
Alderman Patricia Klee
Alderman Thomas Lopez
Alderman Alex Comeau
Alderman Richard A. Dowd
Alderman John Cathey
Alderman Derek Thibeault
Alderman-at-Large Lori Wilshire

**RELATIVE TO THE ADOPTION OF THE FISCAL YEAR 2023 PROPOSED BUDGET FOR THE CITY OF
NASHUA GENERAL, ENTERPRISE, SPECIAL REVENUE AND GRANT FUNDS**

DEPARTMENTAL REVIEWS OF THE PROPOSED FY23 BUDGET FOR THE CITY OF NASHUA

Dept. #		Revenue	Appropriations
	Public Safety		
152	Fire Department	36, 248	126

Chairman O'Brien

At this particular time, Chief Buxton I would like to welcome you to come up and Chief Atkinson please come up. Chief Buxton and company, welcome very much to the budget hearing for your Division. I do caution you. These are directional microphones. So if you can speak directly into the microphone and if you're also could whenever you speak, our transcriber does not - you're a new voice. So please every time you go to speak, state your name and that would be adequate.

All right for everybody else, the Fire Department is Department 152. The revenues are on page 36 to 48 and the appropriations are on page 126. Chief Buxton would you like to lead into the discussion.

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Certainly. So thank you for having us this evening. My name is Steve Buxton. I'm the Chief of the Nashua Fire Department. Right here with me is Karen Conde. She's our Business Administrator and that is Assistant Chief Bill Atkinson down the row. Commissioner Burgess is also in attendance yet tonight. Thanks for taking the time to meet with us this evening. I'd like to thank the Admin. team and NFR for their efforts in building this budget. Karen Conde and Anne-Marie Boucher are highly skilled and organized in their efforts and they're very much appreciated.

Nashua Fire Rescue aims to be the premier emergency service provider in our region and we are constantly striving for excellence in service delivery through education, innovation, teamwork, and collaboration. We protect approximately \$10.5 billion in real and personal property within the City of Nashua. Our Fire Alarm Division protect monitors \$1.6 billion in assets. Nashua Fire Rescue often responds to building fires that require additional personnel. Due to the adequate staffing that we maintain on a daily basis, the incidents are quickly mitigated. Many of these incidents in other communities could overwhelm the available resources resulting in longer term incidents, and loss of property, and eventually tax revenues.

As you may be aware in 2020, we conducted a master plan study of our organization. From this study, forty plus recommendations were brought forward. To handle these recommendations, a strategic plan was undertaken. It was developed to assist and prioritizing these recommendations. The goal is to developing and nurture a modern fire department that meets the needs of our community. As we accomplish these objectives, we will not only be meeting the needs of our community but we'll be continually working towards our goal of achieving an ISO one rating for our Fire Department. Our goal is to achieve this in the next three years.

Nashua Fire Rescue is one of five fire departments in the State of New Hampshire that has an ISO rating 2 currently. Small changes in our operation noted in our last audit will assist us in achieving a one rating. This will result in savings not only for homeowners but also commercial business insurance holders as well as the City of Nashua who's a property owner in our own city. Currently, there are no ISO one rated fire departments in the State of New Hampshire. So if we are able to achieve this, we would be the first. Both the Master Plan and the Strategic Plan are available for viewing on our website.

FY23 goals include the following: the Strategic Planning Committee reviewed the Master Plan and our goal in FY23 is to quickly address those areas with little or no cost impact and deliver a prioritized three to five year plan that will have budgetary impacts for your consideration in the future. Like many others, NFR continues to suffer from recruitment issues. We've created a new process with the assets currently available to us and we are realizing some success. Due to our efforts, we now hire from the region as well as nationwide. We continue to work to clearly identify a pathway for citizens of Nashua to pursue a career with Nashua Fire Rescue. This is an issue that has many contributing factors to it and involves efforts both at a local level as well as the State level.

NFR will continue to work to acquire new equipment and apparatus as defined in the service schedule. Currently two fire engines will very soon be delivered. It's important to note that these apparatus ordered back under FY21 budget, and we ordered two of them at the same time to achieve a savings for the city. Because the order was placed late under the wire before a price increase, we've had to wait our turn in line and it's taken better than 16 months for them to be produced. But probably by July, they will be here in the city.

We are in the process of moving forward a project for that will update our fire station alerting system. Completing this project will improve the health, both behavioral, and physical, and safety of our members, potentially improving response times while giving us the ability to extract data at a level that has never before been available to us. We are currently working with our city partners towards upgrading the city's aging traffic preemption system. Completing this project would also provide benefits potentially for DPW as well as the transit system.

A quick look at the future for you. In years to come, we will continue to move our organization forward to meet the needs of our community. I'd like to make note of a few of the following recommendations from the Master Plan that you can expect to see in front of you in the future. The addition of an Assistant Fire Chief position to handle professional standards for our organization. The job tasks this position would encompass would be all internal affair type activities, recruitment of new firefighters, oversight of the training credentialing programs of the organization, manage the promotional process, develop, implement, and manage a professional development program at Nashua Fire Rescue.

The addition of a Community Risk Reduction Officer. Development of a Community Risk Reduction Program to assist our at risk populations. This is our elderly and our children. The generation called "Baby Boomers" is at an age where they are frequently utilizing our services. We are currently at the tip of the iceberg of this age group and we need to adjust to be able to handle the volume of service requests that is headed our way.

In addition, we also need to develop a program for people who speak languages other than English. Nashua Fire Rescue continues to embrace technology and as we do, we become more reliant on software programs. We're very quickly going to be in need of an IT position. We're outgrowing the bandwidth of the city IT Division. There's consistently need for attention on a daily basis and while our partners in IT do a wonderful job, we appear to be outgrowing the current model.

The addition of a dedicated plans review position to keep pace with the development within the city and we will be looking to secure funding in the future to conduct an engineering study of our facilities and the city will need to prepare to make a significant investment in the fire station maintenance and development. While our members have unmatched pride and professionalism in their efforts to maintain our facilities, a study is needed so we can appropriately plan and prioritize our needs to maintain and update these facilities for the future.

Within the FY23 budget, the following increases should be noted: CBA obligations, utility increases as dedicated by Administrative Services, Purchasing Manager and the Energy Manager. The additional funding for a full year of the inspector investigative position that we started last year by providing half a year's worth of funding. A request for an additional \$250,000 in overtime coverage associated funds. Currently, this is an extremely conservative figure with the CBA obligations in front of us. When we look at the old timeline in our current FY22 budget, overtime is very hard to predict due to the uncertainty of the needs for the coverage, but we continue to have members with large balances of vacation accrual and this will cause us to continue to need greater funds to cover this cost. 90% of our workforce is replaced on a one to one basis. So that means when one member takes a shift off, we need to hire another member and pay them time and a half to replace them. This staffing is requirement under the Collective Bargaining Agreement as well as shown to be the most efficient model for staffing of the City Fire Department of our size.

In closing, I want to take a moment to thank the Mayor and the Board of Aldermen for their continued support. As you may be aware, NFR has been struggling to recover from that were made back in 2007 and 2008. Through the efforts of the Mayor and the Board, we and others we are slowly making progress to regain some of this ground while at the same time being certain the funding in place is placed appropriately for the needs of our community.

I'd like to thank the Board of Fire Commission and most importantly, the members of Nashua Fire Rescue for their efforts each and every day to make our community safer and assist those within our community who are having the worst day imaginable. It takes a special individual to enter into a career in public service and I would say the firefighters are some of the most unique of these individuals. This is not just because of their skill set, but because of their compassion and desire to fix any issue that is presented to them. I'd like to say for your time this evening and I'm more than willing to answer any questions you may have about the FY23 budget for Nashua Fire Rescue.

Alderman Cathey

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a few questions and the first one, I think, you might be able to answer. If we were to get a fire, or alert system - alarm system upgrade, or change it would that come out of the fire budget or the capital improvements?

Chairman O'Brien

That may come out of capital improvements. I think at this particular time that would need to go in. I do see John Griffin that could probably give us a more solid answer. To me, it's a capital project because it does not exist now.

Alderman Cathey

Right.

Chairman O'Brien

Do you agree Chief Buxton?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Yup. That was a proposal under the capital improvements program and it received an A2 rating from that committee.

Alderman Cathey

Okay, great. If I may, Mr. Chair?

Chairman O'Brien

Yes you may.

Alderman Cathey

The IT position that you spoke of would that be a union position?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

That would be something that I'd have to negotiate with the union.

Alderman Cathey

Okay. What would be the estimated cost for that position?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Currently, I don't have any costs. That is something that I would be bringing forward probably next year.

Alderman Cathey

Okay. Thank you.

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

I just wanted to put that on your radar.

Alderman Cathey

All right, I appreciate it. Thank you.

Alderwoman Kelly

Thank you and thank you for thoroughly walking us through your budget. I have two questions. Question one is I know overtime is very hard to put a number to but I am wondering if you feel that it was higher the last couple of years because of COVID and you may be able to kind of come closer to what we've seen historically?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

So to answer your question, I don't know that we'll be able to. As you're certainly well aware, the city had created a policy that allowed members to carry more vacation time than they normally would be allowed to. So members within our organization can carry two years' worth of their allotted vacation time and then on that anniversary date, anything above that two year average gets reset to their maximum ceiling. Under the policy the city had passed, they allowed members to carry more than that. That policy ended, I believe, it was 60 days after the state of emergency was declared done and then members had until December 8th. If their anniversary fell before December 8th, they had this following year to spend their vacation time down to that two year max. So at the end of the day, we have to get through this year for those members to get their time back down to that two year max. The important thing to remember here is that after they get it down to that two year ceiling, they still have two years' worth of vacation time in their pockets that they can spend. So I envisioned it taking multiple years for this to even out.

That being said as you saw in the Mayor's proposed budget, he took \$100,000 mayoral adjustment from our bottom line. So if you look at the money we put in that overtime coverage line being 250, you could actually make an argument that that is now 150. In the very near future, you'll learn that a resolution is going to come in front of you for a shortfall in our current budget and a payroll line because of this vacation usage issue namely. So we're projecting that we're going to have the same issue next year. I know I'm a new Fire Chief but I don't know that it's necessarily a good practice to come in front of this Board on an annual basis looking for a supplemental budget to make my books work. It's not a habit that I'd like to get into anyway.

Alderwoman Kelly

Actually my follow up was where you would find the \$100,000 from the Mayoral cut. So you answered my question. Thank you.

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Thank you.

Alderman Sullivan

Thank you very much. Chief Buxton thanks for coming tonight and walking us through your budget. I was looking at the number of employees that Nashua Fire has and I see a count of 181 and of that, there are 112 firefighters. Where are you staffing wise? Are you fully staffed?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

So we just finished a hiring process. So on Sunday, nine new members of Nashua Fire Rescue hit the floor, fully trained, ready to serve their probationary period. When they hit the floor, we already have four more openings within our organization. The hiring process for a firefighter is a little bit challenging and it takes about three years for us to execute from the time of their application period closing to the time we started recruit school. Recruit school is about a month long, so we'll call the process five months total. So we run it once a year because it's kind of labor intensive. So I would guess that in the future, we'll probably hold recruit schools. The average will be about 10 people in there.

Now in this past year, last year our recruit school size was 14. This year, it was nine. Somewhere throughout the year, a carrying year has built a schedule but we had 28 openings in some way shape, or form. Some for forty something weeks. Some for as little as three weeks. But every time we have an opening in our organization, we have to hire somebody to fill that spot. While we're filling that spot, of course we're paying at an overtime rate. So that halftime rate for the openings we had in our organization last year cost about \$400,000. So that's for people who have left our organization. We're trying to fill that opening and we haven't filled it quite yet.

Alderman Sullivan

Thank you. So after those nine come on, you have four openings after that?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Correct.

Alderman Sullivan

Okay. That's it. All right. Thank you.

Chairman O'Brien

Chief Buxton for clarity and Alderman Cathey if you just standby.

Alderman Cathey

Yeah, sure.

Chairman O'Brien

The demands of the Fire Department are very unique. We just don't hire anybody off the street. Can you explain the pre-requisites that is required to be considered for employment in the City of Nashua, Nashua Fire Rescue?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Certainly. So to get hired on the Nashua Fire Department, you need to have your high school diploma, GED, Firefighter II certification. You have to be a nationally registered emergency medical technician. You have to file an application with us. You enter the process, you go through initial interview, and then a second interview. If you're selected to be hired, that's when we start your background checks. We'll send you - you fill out an information package. We vet your background, criminal, driving, credit. Then we put you through a process where we conduct what we call a "PEP" a pre-employment, psychological evaluation as well as the physical examination. If everybody makes it through all of that, they're eligible to be hired. Back in the day, when Alderman O'Brien got hired, the process was a little bit more lenient perhaps. Same as it was...

Chairman O'Brien

Your recognant was to be completely dumb and a strong back.

Unidentified Female Speaker

He had horses then, right?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

It was certainly much, much the same when I got hired and you had a pool of approximately 400 to 500 people that you were choosing from. When the members go through the - we pull these names of people that are interested off his speed list and take in what they call "a CPAP test". It's a very similar to a physical agility type test with firefighter based work functions. So they have to be on that list also to apply for our organization. That pool currently, the State just held that I think there's less than 50 candidates on that list. So currently the status of the fire service in the State of New Hampshire is we're robbing Peter to pay Paul.

So Nashua Fire is a taker. We take from Hudson. We take from all these other little departments because those people want to come work here. We do have people leave but really when people leave here do they go to another fire department to be a firefighter? Oftentimes, they leave here to go be a chief officer somewhere or they leave here for a different pursuit.

Chairman O'Brien

Alderman Cathey is next but before I recognize Alderman Cathey, which will be done by our Chairman who has joined us and we welcome Alderman Richard A. Dowd join us at 7:18. I'll go back to Clerk and Alderman Dowd welcome as Chair.

Chairman Dowd

Yeah, sorry for the delay. We had a very important meeting on the middle school project, which I couldn't miss. I expected to be here earlier but - so Alderman Cathey you had a question

Alderman Cathey

Thank you, Mr. Chair and thank you Clerk. I have one clarity question and a couple other questions about line items. You said three years. Did you mean three months or is it really three years to hire?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Three to five months. I'm sorry.

Alderman Cathey

Okay. I was like, wow, that's a long time. Okay. Line item that says "stipends". That's a large uptick from the year prior. What is covered underneath the stipends? What is that for? It's 51700.

Karen Conde, Executive Assistant

So that is any of our members that are on the dive team or the hazmat team and this is fully staffing them. The past year where it's actually the budget was \$737,950. It's going up to \$758,700. That's if we're fully staffed for our hazmat and dive teams.

Alderman Cathey

Okay. Follow up Mr. Chair. Next page - the vehicle parts and supplies. I saw that this year you're up \$20,000 but then your expectation is to go back down to the previous budgeted amount. How confident are you that that number is accurate given that it was over this year giving supply chain issues, economy? Is that a confident number or is that sort of just what you guys go with?

Karen Conde, Executive Assistant

We had a very large repair on one of the vehicles. So that's almost the whole \$20,000.

Alderman Cathey

Oh, okay. All right. And one more if I may? For the sick incentive, I noticed this year that you didn't spend any of it but for the next year it's going up from 32 to 40. Can you speak to that?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

So that's a contractual obligation that we have with the labor group. So we have to carry that number in case they do need that (inaudible), they get awarded that money.

Alderman Cathey

Okay, thank you. I'm all set.

Alderwoman Kelly

Thank you. Forgive me if I don't fully understand. So just bear with me for a minute. I remember when we were talking to the Police Department about the waiting period from having a trainee to actually getting them on the force. They were kind of taking this approach where they could take more tenured, and I can't remember what the name of it was called, but like these more tenured people which kind of gets you out of that three year gap. Is that something that the Fire Department could mirror or is what you do completely different? I mean, obviously, it is but.

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

So I think what you're referring to is lateral transfers and they have the ability to hire lateral transfers that are certified officers, I believe, and then they still send them to a minimal amount of training. So we do take lateral transfers. They go through the same process into our organization. However to incorporate them into our system because the Fire Department is more of a team based sport I guess is the best way to put it, we have to still put them through our five week recruit school. So we're able to place them on the floor probably in about the same amount of time that they can maybe even a little quicker versus then having to send somebody up to their school.

Alderman Kelly

If I could call up? Okay, so it wasn't that crazy of a question. So in that case when you're looking for, and I know you're kind of taking what you can, are you're looking for those sorts of lateral transfers more often because you can get them on the floor quicker?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

So it doesn't actually translate to getting them on the floor quicker necessarily in our process. It just is that you're getting a more experienced individual at that point in time.

Alderman Kelly

Thank you.

Alderman Jette

Thank you. So I have some questions about the revenues on page 36. So I have one of my questions is about dispatch services. What is that?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

So when we negotiate the contract with AMR - our medical transport service in the city, we do the dispatching for them. So that money coming in is that fee for them to pay for those dispatching services.

Alderman Jette

Can I follow up? So the other fees that are listed - I looked at the ordinances and it looks like the last time that fee schedule was amended was in 2007. It's a long time ago. Are you planning on reviewing that, and revising it, and bringing it up to date? I don't know but it seems like there's a source of income there that you're leaving on the table and I'm wondering if you have plans to look at that?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

I wholeheartedly agree with you. It is on the list of great ideas we have over there at the Fire Department. It's just a matter of time management of being able to move that ball forward because that involves legislation to adjust that ordinance. But yes, it is on our radar.

Alderman Jette

Okay.

Chairman Dowd

Did that not come up during the strategic planning and that's still going on, right?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Correct.

Alderman Jette

Okay, thank you.

Chairman Dowd

Any other questions? I have a question. Your training fire facility out of the Nashua landfill. You have maintenance of that facility somewhere in here. I may have missed it but.

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

It's a minimal amount but yes we do have a little bit of maintenance budget out there. Again, that's another one of those things that we need to increase because other departments do utilize that and we have a rental fee that we charge them but we need to, as Alderman Jette suggested, we're leaving money on the table because we haven't adjusted that in several years.

Chairman Dowd

Yeah that's going to be the second part of my question if you charge other departments to go and use that facility?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Yes, we do.

Chairman Dowd

Good. Okay. The other question I had, and I may have missed it, did anybody ask about you have maintenance of your trucks as the same amount as last year? Everyone else has come in and says because of the increase in cost of parts and everything else, they bumped up their number. Do you feel that that number is adequate?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

According to our mechanic, yes it is. But I don't know that when he gave us his numbers, we necessarily understood the breadth of the price increase that we were going to be suffering from currently.

Chairman Dowd

So there's tentatively an issue with that line if prices go up on parts?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

If they continue, correct.

Alderman Cathey

Thank you, Mr. Chair. Kind of piggyback off what you guys were talking about. Are we charging an adequate amount for those usage of your training facilities?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Currently, no.

Alderman Cathey

Is that something that is us space or that's just something that you guys come up with as far as fees go?

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

That's something we need to work on in our organization. That's not ordinance based.

Alderman Cathey

Okay.

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

We can adjust that and that will be getting adjusted shortly.

Alderman Cathey

All right, thank you.

Chairman Dowd

Any other questions? No last minute questions? Thank you Chief.

Steve Buxton, Fire Chief

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. Appreciate it.

Alderman Cathey

Thank you.

**MOTION BY ALDERMAN O'BRIEN TO TABLE R-22-035
MOTION CARRIED**

PUBLIC COMMENT - None

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Alderman O'Brien

Yeah, I just got a kick with you and Alderwoman Kelly just to basically say - I mean when I started between night and day, you're right. You picked it right but today I have to say, there's firefighters on this job. When I started, most of them were tradesmen. They brought their plumbing skills, electrical skills, other things. But now, there's firefighters who have Associate Degrees and it's been quite the change that I've seen over my 35 years. So I was one of the archaic ones. When we first got hired, let's just leave is that you know dumb mind and a strong back was a requirement. There was a third but we'll leave that alone.

Alderwoman Kelly

Thank you for your service Alderman O'Brien.

Chairman Dowd

Any other comments? Seeing none. By the way, thank you all for coming in from the Fire Department. It's always a pleasure to have you come in and go over your budget with you.

REMARKS BY THE ALDERMEN - None

ADJOURNMENT

**MOTION BY ALDERMAN O'BRIEN TO ADJOURN
MOTION CARRIED**

The meeting was declared closed at 7:33 p.m.

Alderman-at-Large Michael B. O'Brien, Sr.
Committee Clerk