



SHREWSBURY FIRE DEPARTMENT

11 Church Road
Shrewsbury, Massachusetts 01545-5398

11/23/2018

To: Town Manager Kevin Mizikar / Town Officials
From: Chief James Vuona
RE: Request for Increased Staffing

Executive Overview

Since 2013 as Fire Chief, I have been advocating for an increase in fire department staffing by a total of 8 -10 positions. In February of 2016, we added the position of Deputy Chief to our ranks. Please note; this is primarily an administrative dayshift position that was designed and created to handle Fire Prevention and Code Enforcement. The following excerpt is from the 2013 Fire Department Town Report:

“We continue to operate with a staffing level that was established at Town Meeting back in 1987. For perspective purposes, it should be noted that in 1987 the population in Shrewsbury was 22,547 people and that today’s population exceeds 35,000. In 1987, the Shrewsbury Fire Department responded to 789 calls for service. That is nearly 3,000 calls less than we responded to in 2013. To adequately protect our community, the Town should consider incrementally adding 8-10 full-time positions to the Fire Department over the next five (5) years.”

We have received the support of the Town Manger’s office and the Board of Selectman from FY 2015 through the present to pursue Federal (AFG) Grant funding for four (4) firefighter positions to address our staffing shortages. Funds for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants Program are awarded on a competitive basis and made directly to local fire departments and other eligible organizations. As of this date, we have been unsuccessful in three (3) attempts to secure funding. I believe the reason we have failed to receive AFG funding for a staffing grant is due to the following; we have not asked for enough personnel to reach the nationally recognized NFPA 1710 standard that guides the award process. If we would have applied to fund eight (8) positions, we would have increased our chance for success.

The Town of Westborough recently applied for and was awarded eight (8) firefighter positions through the AFG Grant process because they demonstrated the ability to achieve a recognizable standard (NFPA 1710). This brings Westborough’s staffing to

forty (40) firefighter positions (which is now larger than Shrewsbury's Fire Department) despite the fact that Westborough's population is approximately half that of Shrewsbury. The current fire department staffing deficiencies we face also negatively impacts the town in the following ways/areas:

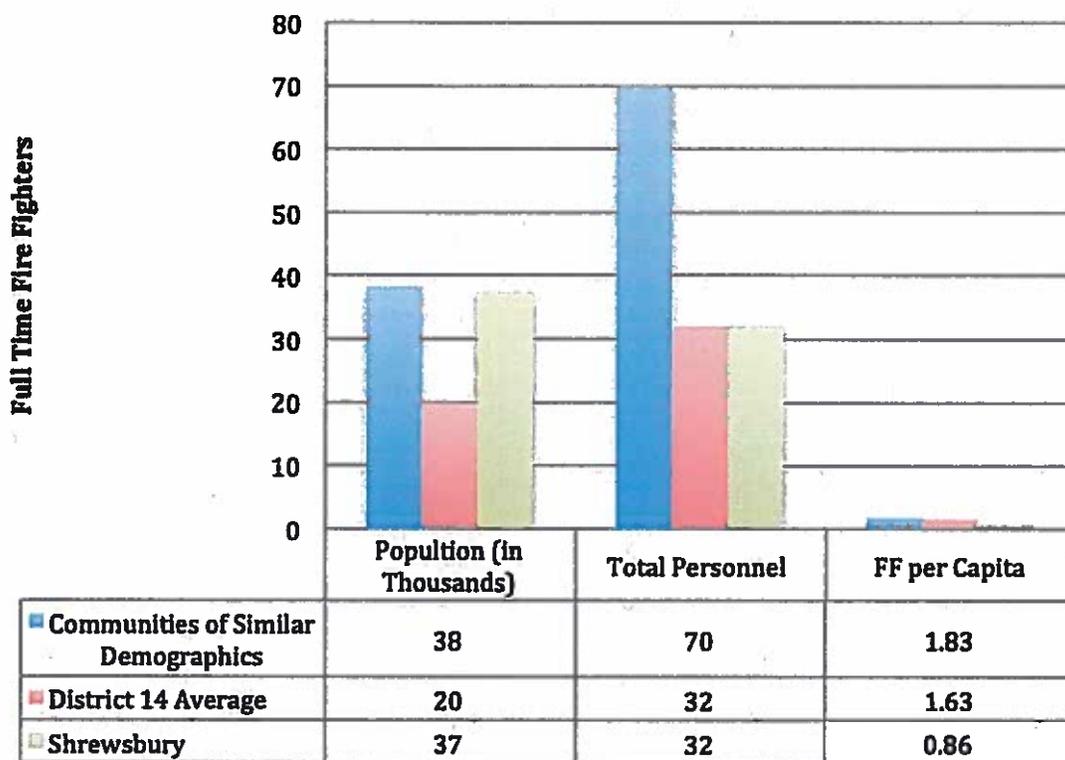
- Insurance Rates (Poor ISO Ratings)
- Increased Injuries to firefighters (NIST & NIOSH Studies)
- Overtime expenditure (lost work time due to injuries)
- Delayed or ineffective responses (lack of staff and supervision)
- Healthcare and Legal Costs (IOD/111F/Liability Issues)

For the past three (3) years, Town government has agreed to the terms of the Federal (SAFER) Grant. Which are; 75% paid by grant award in years one (1) and two (2) and 35% in year three (3) with the balance each year paid by the town. In the fourth year (FY20), the Town would be assuming the full financial responsibility for the positions. In other words, that timeframe to assume this cost is upon us this budget cycle. The former Town Manager stated that more funds would become available at the completion of the Lakeway Commons Project (now completed). Further, reduced funding over the next several years to fully fund OPEP (Retirement Benefits) should make additional funding available to the Town to be used towards public safety purposes. In the future, consideration for operating an EMS-based Fire Service (aka Ambulance Service) could further support and defray the cost of operating the Fire Department.

Over the past five (5) years, I have spoken with members of the Board of Selectmen (both past and present) and all have agreed that the fire department is in need of more staffing. Members of the fire department have worked with representatives of the Finance Committee (past and present), including a Public Safety Subcommittee that concluded the Shrewsbury Fire Department is in need of increased staffing. The most recent Town of Shrewsbury Masterplan cited the need for increased staffing for both the Fire and Police Departments. The simple fact of the matter is – the fire department has fallen way behind any and all recognizable standards, and we currently operate at levels that are unsafe for firefighters and ultimately unsafe for the general public. The town has grown exponentially since 1987, yet the fire department has not. In 2001, Chief Gerald LaFlamme created a 10- Year Fire Department Strategic Plan which advocated for more personnel and supervision (including Lieutenants). Some 18 years later, little has been accomplished to meet the basic safety goals outlined in that document.

Shrewsbury's firefighter (FF) staffing levels demand prolonged periods of increased workloads and escalate the probability of injury on duty, as well as line of duty deaths. According to a National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) survey (2015), the national average FF per 1,000 people is 1.54. As of November 26, 2018, the Professional Firefighters of Massachusetts (PFFM) indicates fire department staffing within the Commonwealth is 1.58 FFs per 1,000 people (2018). With thirty-two (32) FFs, Shrewsbury's FF per 1,000 people is at a dangerously low 0.86. Comparatively, similar communities are reporting 1.83 FF per 1,000 and Massachusetts Fire District 14 partners are reporting 1.63 FF per 1,000 people. The following graph illustrates this comparison.

Fire Fighter Staffing Comparison



These statistics demonstrate that the Shrewsbury Fire Department has one of the lowest staffing levels per capita in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Additionally, the percentage of funding the Town allocates annually to staffing the fire department is among the very lowest in the state for comparative communities. At this time, a considerable staffing correction is needed and required at the Shrewsbury Fire Department. I am requesting Town Government make an investment in the public safety of this community in FY 2020.

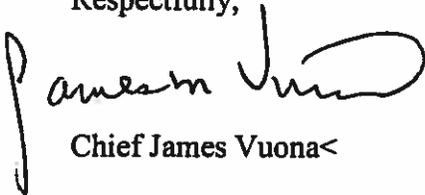
Requested Action

I would advocate for one (1) of the following incremental options:

1. Add eight (8) new Fire Firefighter Positions beginning with four (4) on July 1st, 2019 and four more on July 1st, 2020.
2. Add four (4) new Firefighter Positions beginning July 1st, 2019 and apply for an additional four (4) new Firefighter Positions via the Federal AFG (SAFER) Grant.
3. Apply for a Federal AFG (SAFER) Grant to fund eight (8) positions beginning on/or about the time of award in FY20.

Additionally, I would recommend the creation of the Rank of Lieutenant within the fire department. We currently operate with no direct supervision at our outlying stations and with insufficient oversight at emergency scenes. With each incremental increase of four (4) positions, I would suggest the creation of one (1) Lieutenant. The supervisory positions would be created and filled by current full-time members of the department. Ideally, each shift would increase by two (2) members (from 9 to 11 personnel). Each of the four (4) shifts would have a Captain and 3 to 4 firefighters at Fire Headquarters', and a Lieutenant and two (2) firefighters at both Stations 2 and Station 3. I believe this configuration of personnel would serve the Town well currently, as well as for a number of years in the future. I thank you for your consideration in regards to the critical staffing needs at the Shrewsbury Fire Department.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Vuona". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Chief James Vuona<