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FEATURED

Plymouth to consider hiring 12 career firefighters to remedy staffing challenges, decrease response times

By Kristen Miller kristen.miller@ecm-inc.com May 14, 2018



(SUN SAILOR STAFF FILE PHOTO BY Kristen Miller)

The Plymouth Public Safety Department is looking at ways to remedy current staffing challenges as part of the 2019 budget process.

The Plymouth City Council is considering ways to increase public safety by potentially adding more career firefighters to the city's current model.

City officials, including Public Safety Director Mike Goldstein and Fire Chief Rodger Coppa, met during a May 8 work session to discuss options to address identified staffing challenges within the city fire department.

"We have had a very good fire department for many years," Coppa said, noting the paid on-call system has served the department well for many years. "As the community has continued to grow, our public safety needs have continued to evolve along with that."

Currently, the fire department relies on 64 paid on-call firefighters and six full-time career firefighters to staff its three stations.

Traditionally referred to as volunteer firefighters, paid on-call firefighters are part-time employees of the city. They serve both scheduled time on the station as duty crew and on call-backs, when they are on call and paged to the station for a service call. Requirements for paid on-call firefighters are to respond to 30 percent of calls and work a minimum of 12 hours of duty crew shifts each quarter. A great majority of personnel meet or exceed current minimum call-back requirements, Coppa noted

Hired in 2017, six career firefighters work during the daytime hours Monday through Friday at Stations 2 and 3, and on Saturdays and Sundays at Station 2.

"While some good strides have been made, the department still does not possess a predictive staffing model whereby we know how many resources are available to respond to a fire or rescue event within an accepted timeframe," Goldstein said.

Even when stations are staffed, call-backs are used throughout the day and night to supplement the staffing, and the reality of the current model is the unpredictability of who is available to cover those shifts, and respond to calls. According to data provided, the "great majority" of personnel meet current minimum shift hour requirements, with a few working more than the minimum and up to 27 hours a week if desired.

"People's lives are busy, the family dynamic is much more important today than it was decades ago. And we are seeing that reality within the fire service," Coppa said. "It really does detract from our ability to ask more and more from them."

The challenge then is the competing models. When more is required for duty crew staffing, there is less call-back participation and vice versa, Coppa explained.

Unsatisfactory response times when relying solely on paid on-call is another challenge. Having paid staff at the station eliminates the time it takes a firefighter to respond to a pager and get to the station. The majority of response times for duty crew (already at the station) is eight minutes and

non-duty crew is 13 minutes. The National Fire Protection Association suggests a four-minute response.

The route time, however, isn't something that can be controlled, Coppa said.

"The opportunity becomes, can we shorten that amount of time it takes people to come to the station?" he questioned.

Another challenge is having the appropriate resources on scene in a timely manner, Coppa said, noting there are personnel who are unable to drive a truck due to their tenure on the department.

Reaching the authorized staffing levels and retention was also noted.

"We get close and then lose some," Coppa said.

Historically, the department has lost 30 percent of recruits within five years, according to Dave Drelan, deputy fire chief. Since 2007, the department hired 69 firefighters and 37 of those crew members remain.

When asked if better pay and/or pension would help, Coppa said that was an effective tool years ago, but is no longer the case for recruitment or retention in Plymouth. Adding more incentives would be short-lived, Coppa said, referring back to the "appropriate prioritization of family and job requirements."

Looking at the options

In an attempt to "close that gap and add some consistency and predictability to response and staffing model," Goldstein and Coppa presented three potential options to the council for further discussion.

The first option would increase the number of full-time career firefighters from the current six to 18 over three consecutive years as part of a phased-in approach.

While this model would no longer depend on paid on-call firefighters to fill the stations, they would still be needed to work shifts and supplement by being called back during fire events, Coppa explained.

The second option would be to hire 78 additional paid on-call to fulfill the shift needs. Coppa noted doubling the current staffing levels would be difficult without expanding the radius to recruit more firefighters.

Councilmember Judy Johnson said this option wouldn't address retention.

"I appreciate that you're bringing it before us, but it seems like it works on paper, but not in real life," she said.

"It's an option, but not a recommendation," Goldstein said.

The third option would be to continue with the current model.

Relying solely on full-time career firefighters isn't an option currently being explored, as the department would need 48 firefighters on shift, Coppa noted.

Johnson asked if that model is what is used cities like Plymouth.

"There's not a lot of history there," Coppa said, noting there are a variety of staffing models across the country from those that have gone to full-time staffing quickly and others that still rely solely on volunteers. The combination model, as presented in option one, is becoming the trend, he said, noting the paid on-call model is difficult to support. There are communities where it works, and others where it doesn't work, depending on the needs of the community, Coppa explained.

The majority of the metro departments are either paid-on call only, blended with career and paid on-call, and full career model. Burnsville and Eagan have gone to career firefighters only, Goldstein said.

"Maplewood is also headed that way," he said, noting the city also runs the ambulance service, along with Burnsville and Edina.

"And we're not suggesting that now," Goldstein said of the full career model.

Coppa made clear that option one does not eliminate the need for paid on-call firefighters. The expectation would be to have the paid on-call members working with the career firefighters to supplement and remain proficient with the minimum requirements.

While Goldstein said it's hard to provide a definite number, he would like to see eight to 10 paid on-call assigned to each station, for a total of 24-30 paid on-call firefighters, less than half of the current level.

"We just want to be thoughtful in how we do it," he said.

Upgrades to the fire stations would also be needed in order to accommodate changes, the cost of which will be determined after a facilities study.

The blended model "gives us a lot of advantages," Goldstein said, particularly with the mutual aid the department currently has with some neighboring jurisdictions that are staffed 24/7.

Those eight professionals, including command staff, would be able manage most day-time events that could occur in the city effectively and in a timely manner, Goldstein said. On large events, the city would continue to rely on paid on-call members to respond to the station, but "at least we would have eight people on scene making things happen."

With a growing community, the officials talked about the potential for adding a fourth station or moving stations. While the current stations aren't in "ideal" locations, moving them wouldn't "gain us all that much," Goldstein said.

"With two stations staffed appropriately, we can really get anywhere we need to in the city within eight minutes," and four minutes, ideally, to those in proximity to Stations Two and Three, he said.

Noting public safety as a top priority among residents, Johnson said she would like to see the department get to 18 career firefighters "sooner rather than later."

Public safety is a need not a want, she said. The estimated cost would be \$1.2 million each year for salary and benefits.

Councilmember Ned Carroll expressed his support of public safety. "It's of critical importance to all of us," he said, referencing fires that occurred in his neighborhood over the years.

"I think this is something that is personal to all of us," said Councilmember Jeff Wosje, who also shared stories of homes lost to fire.

Wosje also explained his concern the proposed changes would have on the department by reducing duty crew hours.

"It will probably run the gamut," Wosje said.

Coppa agreed, explaining some firefighters use it as a part-time job, and while the department would still rely on them for call-back mode, the numbers would decrease, though he couldn't provide a definite number at that time.

"But to be clear, we're not talking about eliminating paid on-call," said Mayor Kelli Slavik.

Johnson agreed. "Everybody is valued here," she said, noting the department could get to the staffing levels referenced by Goldstein through attrition. This option would relieve the current pressure of staffing the stations, she said.

"We certainly appreciate all of our firefighters, whether they are paid on-call or full-time, they do a great job," Slavik said, noting there have been significant fires, but no loss of life. "Our fire staff is awesome no matter what role they play."

No decisions were made during the meeting and more information is expected to come throughout the city budget process.

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Kristen Miller

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NEWS

25 part-time Maplewood firefighters to lose jobs as city goes to full-time model

By S. M. CHAVEY | schavey@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

PUBLISHED: January 25, 2018 at 4:56 pm | UPDATED: January 26, 2018 at 3:19 pm

Maplewood's 25 part-time firefighters have known for months that the city planned to eliminate their jobs and hire full-timers instead to deal with an increase in calls.

On Thursday night, it became official when the city council approved a consultant's plan to employ nine full-time employees to respond to fire and emergency medical calls.

With the new staffing model, response time will decline from 8.3 minutes on average to eight minutes, according to Michael Mondor, the city's chief of EMS.

"The data's there. It really looks like, to be good financial stewards, this is something we need to do," Maplewood Mayor Nora Slawik said at the council meeting.

But board members of the Maplewood Volunteer Firefighters Relief Association say they were shocked last week when city staff suggested that termination might come as soon as March 1, and that severance packages might be smaller than expected.

“We’ve given up holidays, family vacations. We’ve showed up in the middle of the night ... and all of a sudden, there’s zero recognition of that,” board members said, declining to be named for fear of hurting severance packages. “That’s probably the single most back-stabbing frustration we could express.”

Severance packages and an official termination date have not been set. Current part-timers will be given preference in applying for the full-time positions, city officials said.

Since 2007, fire and EMS calls have jumped from about 3,800 a year to about 6,000, and are expected to rise to 9,000 by 2025.

In response to those numbers, the city hired a consultant in February 2017 to evaluate its staffing model.

The department has been understaffed for years, city officials say.

COULD SOLUTION INCLUDE PART-TIMERS?

Most part-time staffers have full-time jobs elsewhere and traditionally worked more holiday, night and weekend shifts.

Association members said that they understood the desire for stability but that part-timers could be part of it. Since the part-timers are paid by the hour and don’t receive most benefits, they say, the cost of keeping them on is minimal.

“When emergency calls swell up our current staffing capacity ... a part-timer can respond to the station and they can offer emergency coverage,” association board president Tracy Imm said at Thursday’s meeting. “You don’t use that coverage until they show up, until that emergency. That’s why it’s cost-effective.”

In the past year, part-timers put in about 16,000 hours, Imm said. It would be unwise of the city to eliminate all of that help by March 1 without a contingency plan, board members said.

Mondor said it takes only three full-time employees to cover the hours that 20 or 21 part-timers work. He also said many people, including a few of the part-timers, have expressed interest in the full-time positions.

WHAT WILL SEVERANCE BE?

Some of the part-timers said they accepted an average \$14-per-hour wage knowing they would receive a large severance package at retirement. Now, those benefits are threatened by the early termination of their jobs.

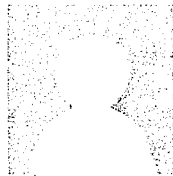
The association’s board made an aggressive pension proposal that would essentially drain the city’s \$1.5 million fund for firefighter pensions and equipment.

The suggested March 1 deadline came in response to pending legislation that, if passed, would require the city to increase payouts.

City manager Melinda Coleman, who has been leading negotiations with the volunteers’ association, said severance packages have yet to be determined, but there are other ways to use that \$1.5 million fund.

“We intend to use those funds for fire and EMS service,” Coleman said in an email. “Those are taxpayer dollars, and they should be used for public safety.”

Tags: [Maplewood](#) [Ramsey County](#)



S. M. Chavey

Sarah Chavey is a year-long fellow through the Collegiate Network. She is a graduate of Hillsdale College, in Michigan.

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Eagan fire chief wants fewer volunteer firefighters, more paid ones

By MELISSA STEINKEN | msteinken@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

October 23, 2017 at 7:00 am

Eagan's fire chief would like to reduce the size of his volunteer firefighting force — and beef up the paid staff.

Chief Mike Scott is proposing adding 12 full-time firefighters, six in 2018 and six in 2019.

The city has 93 volunteer firefighters, but Scott would like to reduce that number to 63.

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✘ Council, would require a budget
ent in 2019.

for eight years, Scott said, and
ience to become good at the job.
; declined and turnover has
lunteers have left each year.

Volunteer training costs about \$16,000 a year, and uniforms and equipment can cost \$10,000 for each firefighter.

Since 9/11, training for firefighters has become more intense and time-consuming, Scott said.

“If you think about the ’70s versus 2017, there are more types of training than you ever would have thought,” he said. “There’s training for school shootings, hazardous materials and more medical calls, which all require certifications.”

“For an emergency response, you have to have a predictable and reliable response team that Eagan does not have right now,” Scott said.

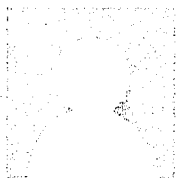
Scott also is proposing that volunteers sign up for shifts, which would make their schedules and the city’s response to emergency calls more predictable.

When emergency calls come in, volunteers are paged at home, Scott said. This adds around five to six minutes in response time and “you never know who is going to show up for a call,” he said.

Eagan has recently consolidated operations at three fire stations, down from six, as recommended by a 2009 city review of fire department operations. Once those stations are fully staffed, there will be less need for volunteers and firefighters on duty will be closer to respond, Scott said.

Eagan City Administrator Dave Osberg said he expects the city council to support the changes when it votes on the 2018 budget in December.

Tags: [Dakota County](#) [Eagan](#)

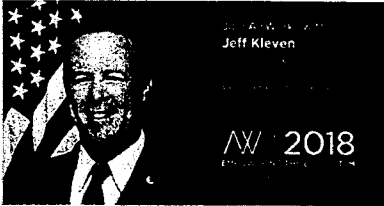


Melissa Steinken

Melissa Steinken is an intern working for the Pioneer Press as part of a fall 2017 University of Minnesota journalism class.

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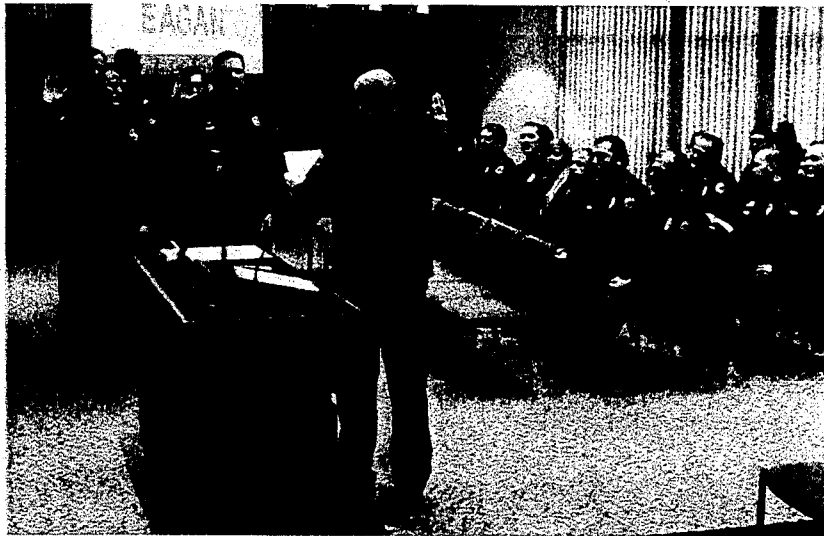


EAGAN

(<http://www.cityofeagan.com>)

What can we help you find?

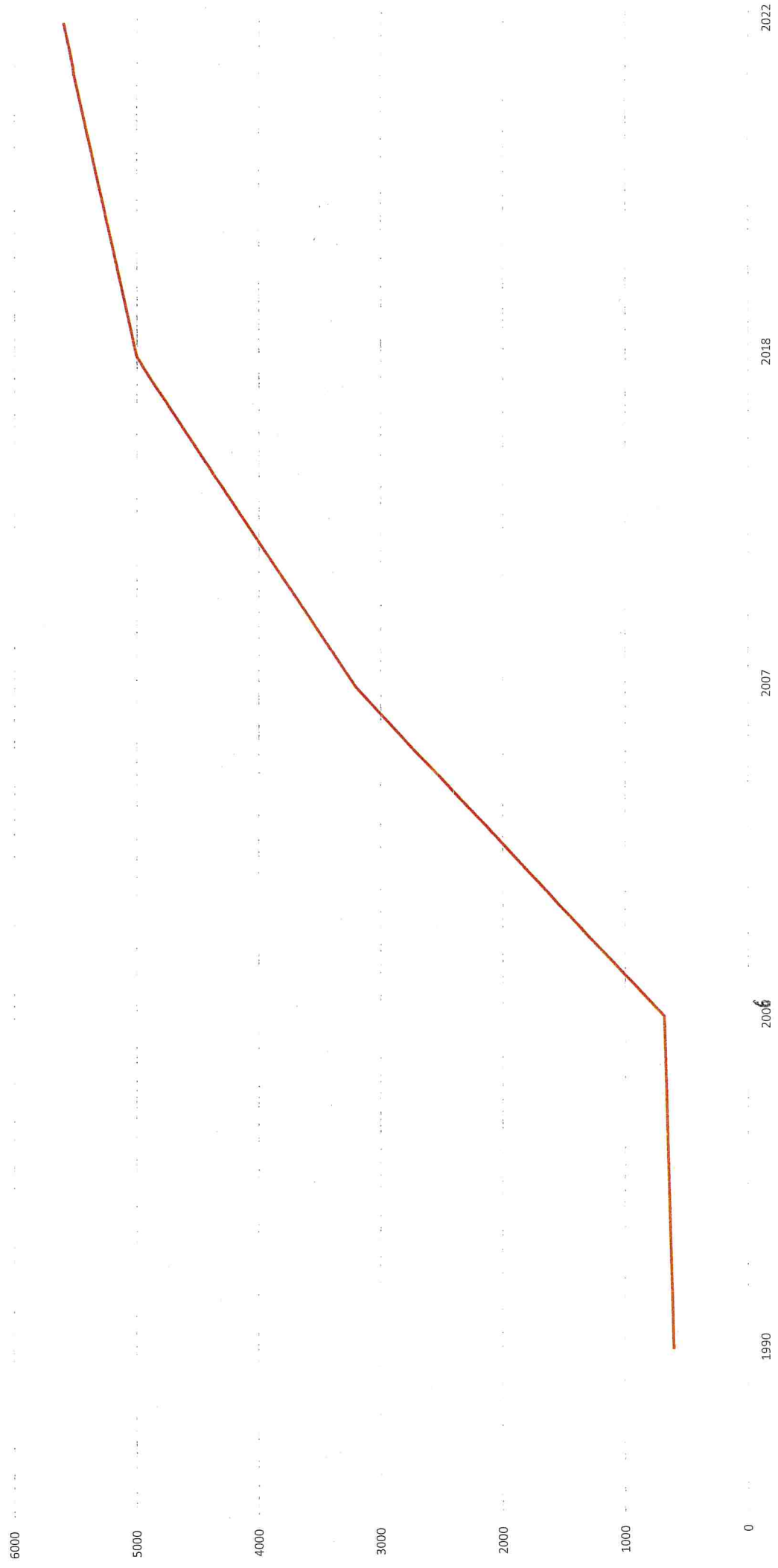
Firefighters Take Oath Marking Department Milestone



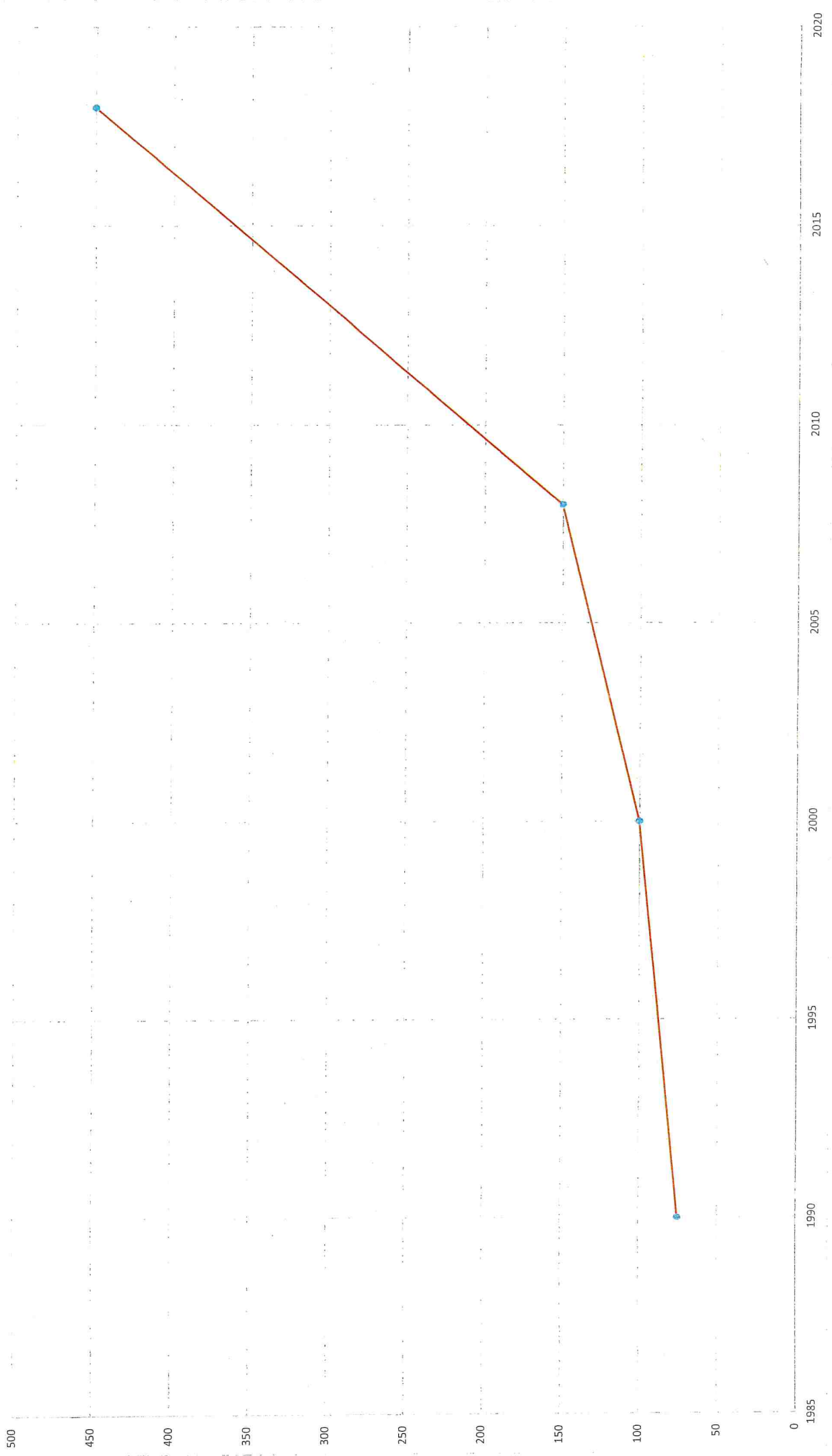
In historic action on Tuesday, March 21, six Fire Captains and six full time firefighters were sworn in at the City Council meeting. These 12 are the first full time firefighters to take the Oath of Office as full time firefighters in the department's 55-year history.

Fire Chief Scott administered the oath. Six of the 12 are new firefighters, hired in 2018 while the other six were hired through a grant program (SAFER) in 2014, but not sworn in while temporary employees.

Call Volume by Year



Community Outreach Events by Year



Five On Duty

Apparatus




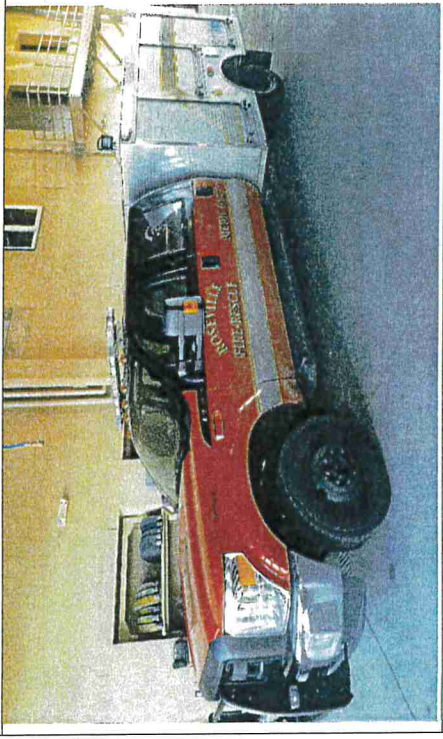
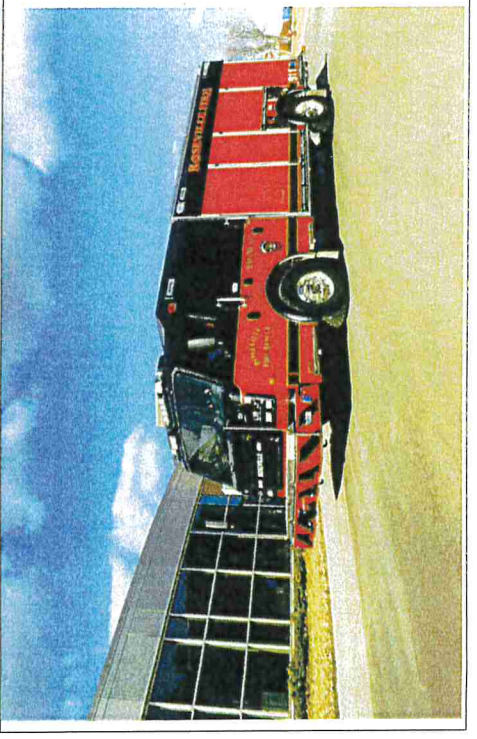
Personnel

Medic-610
Two Firefighter/EMT/Paramedics

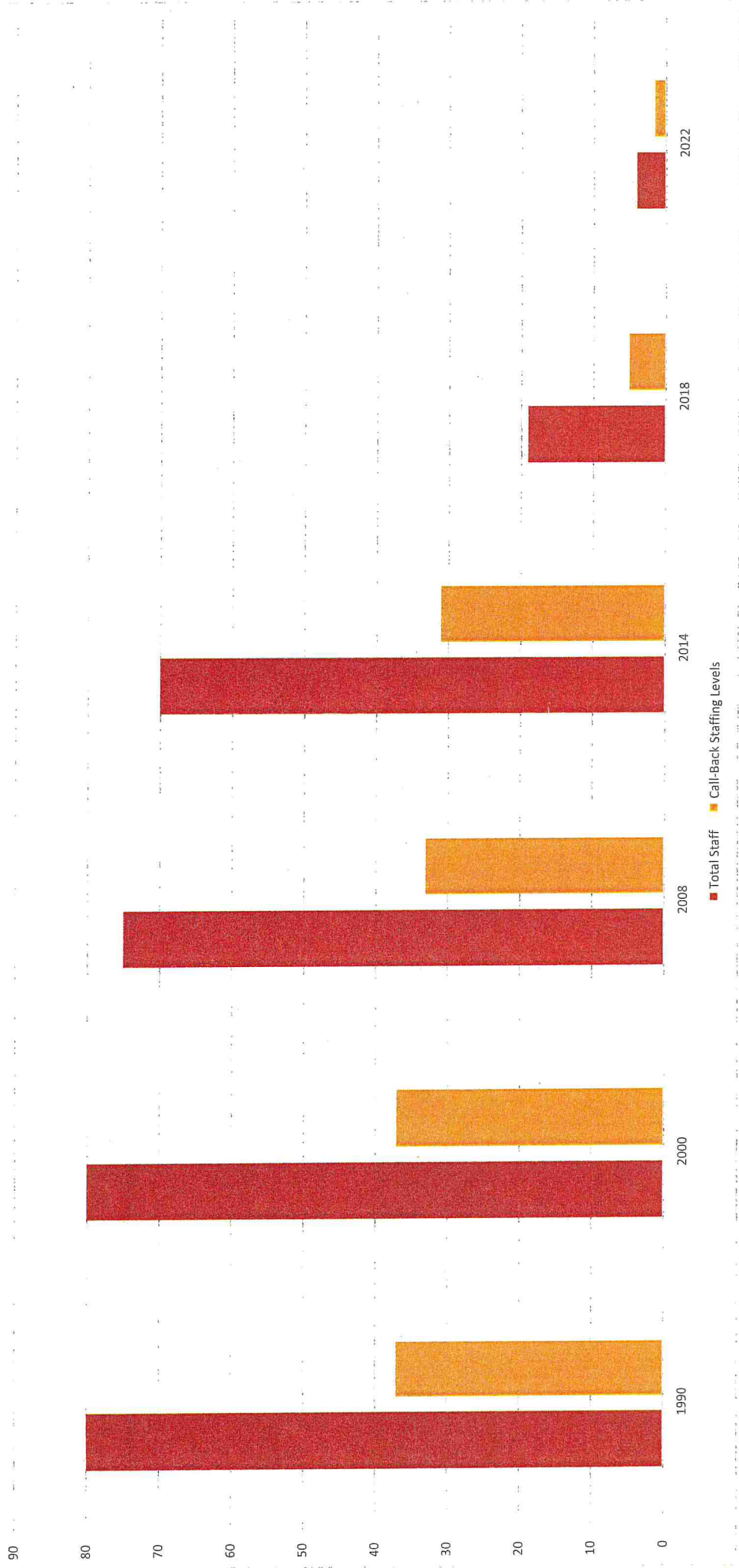


Engine-631
Two to Three Firefighter/EMT/Paramedics

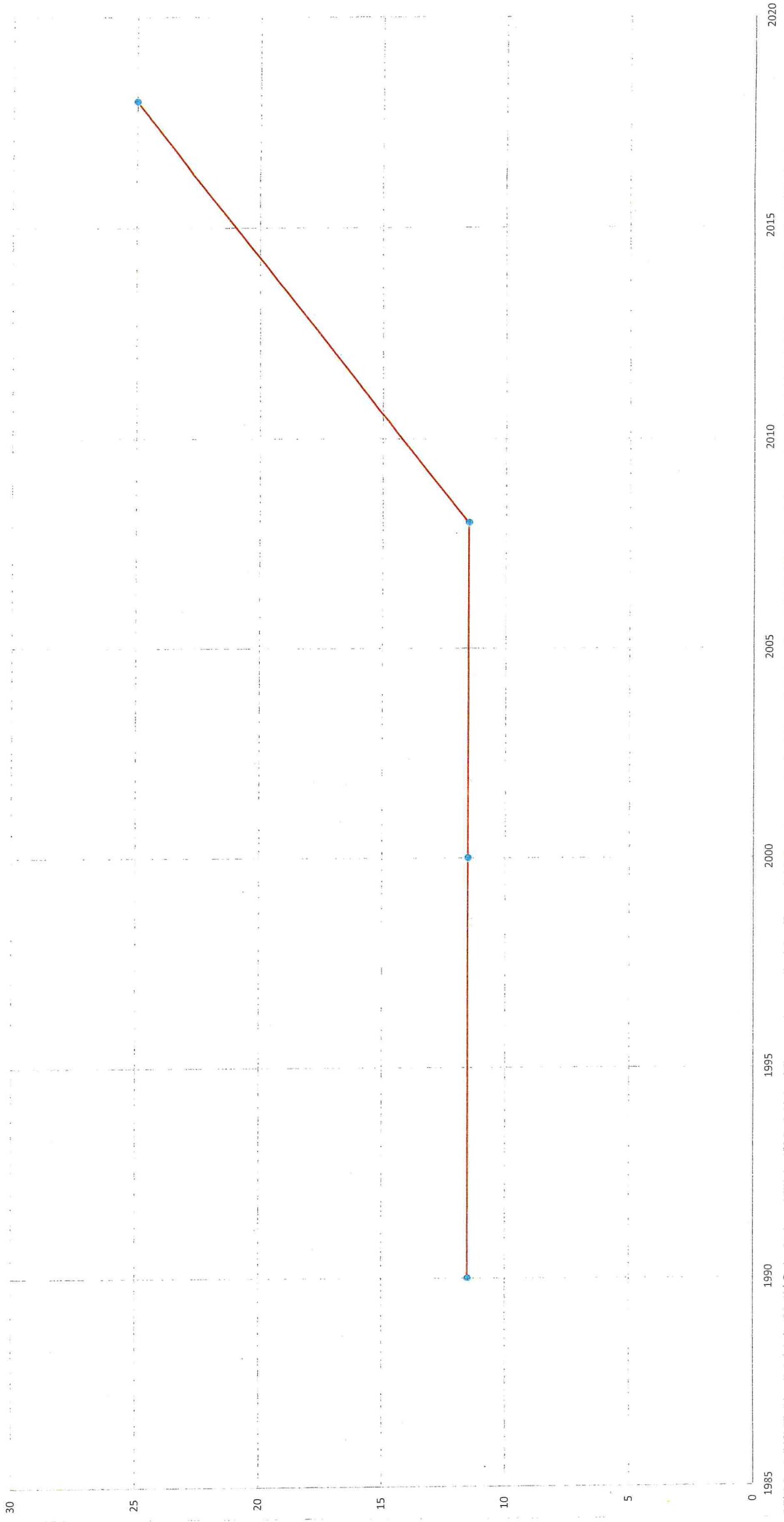
Eight on Duty

Apparatus	Personnel on Duty
	<p><u>Medic-610</u> Two Firefighter/EMT/Paramedics</p>
	<p><u>Medic-611</u> Two Firefighter/EMT/Paramedics</p>
	<p><u>Engine-631</u> Four Firefighter/EMT/Paramedics</p>

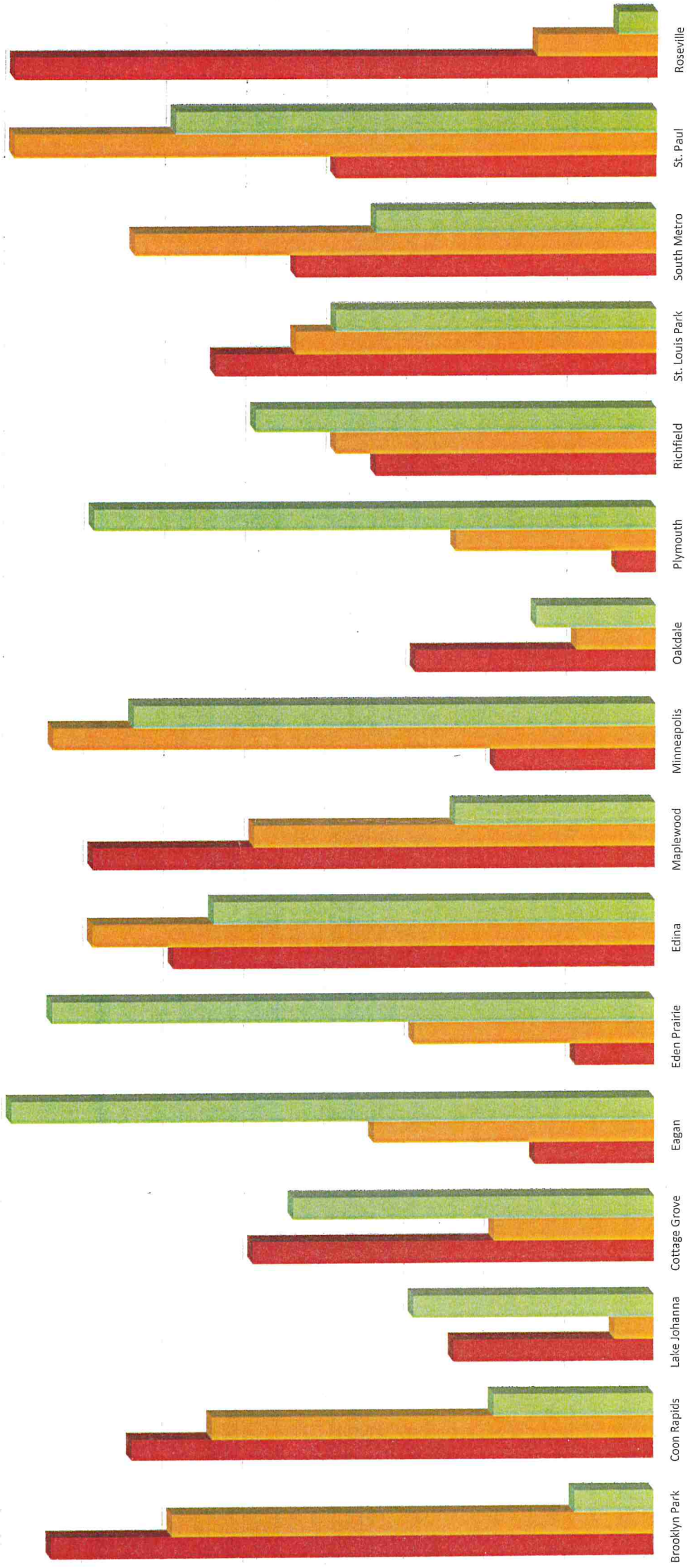
Call-Back Staffing Levels by Year



Unit Response by Year



Department Rankings



Fire Department	Staffing model: Full-time/Combination	Number of FT	Number of PT	Total Staffing	Population	Annual Call Volume	On-Duty Staff (Minimum)	Calls Per On-Duty FF	Rank (Calls per On-Duty FF)	On-Duty Staffed Response Units	Calls Per Staffed Unit	Rank (Busiest Units)	Annual Budget	Rank (Highest Budget)	Budget Cost Per Call	Rank (Highest Budget per Call)	EMS Level: None, BLS, ALS, Transport	Inspections conducted by on-duty FF
Brooklyn Park	Combination	25	25	50	78,362	8,087	6	1,347.80	2	4	2021.75	2	5,093,059	5	629.78	15	BLS First Response	No
Coon Rapids	Combination	31	20	51	62,435	6,223	6	980	4	3	1960.00	4	4,982,802	6	800.71	13	BLS First Response	No
Lake Johanna	Combination	4	100	104	40,168	2,500	4	625	12	2	1250.00	13	2,138,500	16	855.40	11	BLS First Response	Yes
Cottage Grove	Combination	12	55	67	35,250	3,070	2	1,535	1	2	1535.00	8	2,969,000	13	957.10	8	ALS Transport	No
Eagan	Combination	9	93	102	67,000	1,807	4	451.75	13	2	903.50	15	4,360,900	10	2,413.34	1	BLS First Response- Limited	No
Eden Prairie	Combination	9	95	104	62,593	1,625	6	270.8	16	2	812.50	16	3,705,584	11	2,280.36	2	BLS First Response- Limited	Yes
Edina	Combination	31	15	46	50,261	5,728	6	954.7	5	3	1976.00	5	6,977,507	3	1,218.14	6	ALS Transport	No
Maplewood	Full-time	30	0	30	39,054	5,940	7	848.6	7	3	1980.00	3	4,958,790	7	834.81	12	ALS Transport	No
Minneapolis	Full-time	414	0	414	382,578	41,348	95	435	14	38	1088.10	14	65,100,000	2	1,574.44	4	BLS First Response	No
Oakdale	Combination	10	34	44	28,655	2,765	4	691.25	11	2	1382.50	12	2,055,000	16	743.22	14	ALS Transport	No
Plymouth	Combination	14	65	74	73,633	1,523	6	253.8	17	2	761.50	17	3,196,029	12	2,098.51	3	BLS First Response- Limited	No
Richfield	Full-time	27	0	27	36,157	4,241	6	706.83	10	3	1413.67	11	4,441,800	9	1,047.35	7	BLS First Response	No
St. Louis Park	Combination	27	25	52	47,933	5,100	7	728.6	9	3	1700.00	7	4,657,973	8	913.33	9	BLS First Response	No
South Metro	Full-time	40	0	40	40,132	6,136	8	767	8	4	1534.00	9	5,576,449	4	908.81	10	BLS First Response and BLS Transport	No
St. Paul	Full-time	419	0	419	285,000	45,803	114	352	15	30	1526.76	10	68,560,000	1	1,496.85	5	ALS Transport	No
Roseville	Combination	17	22	39	34,000	5,038	4	1,272	3	2	2544.00	1	2,381,410	14	468.04	16	BLS First Response	Yes

8