



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, APRIL 11, 2023

CALL TO ORDER

The Columbia City Council conducted a Budget Workshop on Tuesday, April 11, 2023 at City Hall (Mayor's Conference Room), Columbia, South Carolina. The Honorable Daniel J. Rickenmann, Mayor called the meeting to order at 3:02 p.m. and the following councilmembers were present: The Honorable Howard E. Duvall, Jr., The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr., The Honorable William Brennan, The Honorable Aditi Bussells, and The Honorable Tina N. Herbert. The Honorable Peter M. Brown was absent. Also present were Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager and Ms. Levanie Summerville, Assistant City Clerk. This meeting was advertised in accordance with the South Carolina Freedom of Information Act.

INVOCATION

The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr. offered the invocation.

CITY COUNCIL DISCUSSION

1. Columbia Fire Department Update - Mr. Aubrey D. Jenkins, Fire Chief, Mr. Mickey Folsom, Assistant Chief, Mr. Christopher Kip, Assistant Chief, and Mr. William Broschious, Community Risk Reduction Chief

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager said I was instructed to bring research back to the Public Safety Committee on scheduling options, but we met with Chairman Duvall and thought it was best to bring it back to all of Council. I hope you find the information enlightening as we have to make bigger decisions about the pay plan.

a) Creative Recommendations Regarding Leave and Staffing

Mr. Aubrey D. Jenkins, Fire Chief said today we will talk about adjustments to annual leave, improved sick leave accountability, potential use of part time positions, and the pay plan.

Mr. Christopher Kip, Assistant Fire Chief for Operations said currently all suppression employees select their annual leave in October or November for the following year. We do this to ensure we have proper staffing every day, which is a 24 hour shift. We also do this to ensure that personnel are able to take all of their permissive leave in a year. We are proposing a change to provide more day-to-day accountability and to help manage non-FLSA overtime.



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Mayor Rickenmann inquired about the average number of non-FLSA overtime hours per person at full staff. He said we can plan ahead if we understand those numbers.

Mr. Mickey Folsom, Assistant Fire Chief said we schedule 164 hours per person for the year. We hope this proposed strategy will lessen the other overtime and increase staffing.

Mr. Christopher Kip, Assistant Fire Chief for Operations explained that overtime depends on many factors. Under this proposal, employees will continue to submit leave requests for the upcoming year. However, an employee will not be required to use all of their leave at once. After the initial selection process, employees will have an opportunity to use unassigned leave on a first-come-first-served basis. We believe this is a more flexible procedure for selecting annual leave.

Councilor Bussells said we discussed a quarterly schedule and looking at holidays in groups versus a year in advance. She suggested approving leave on a merit based system.

Mr. Christopher Kip, Assistant Fire Chief for Operations said there are a number of allowed positions by rank that can take annual leave each day.

Councilor Duvall said the difference in the schedules and the amount of accrued leave makes this difficult. An employee has to accrue 24 hours in order to take a shift off.

Mr. Christopher Kip, Assistant Fire Chief for Operations said we have specific guidelines that dictate when an employee has to bring in a doctor's excuse for sick leave. To add a formal level of accountability, employees receive a Letter of Sick Leave Use from the battalion chief. Improved measures for monitoring sick leave use will help decrease sick leave use, ensure proper staffing, and potentially decrease non-FLSA overtime.

Mr. William Broscious, Community Risk Reduction Division Chief said we've conducted research on the effective use of part-time firefighters. A few examples come from West Columbia, Greenwood, North Spartanburg, Beaufort/Town of Port Royal and Sumter. Advantages include recruitment and collaboration with other departments. We have to determine the vetting process and training for part-time firefighters.

There was a brief discussion related to the safety of firefighters, budget implications, implementation timeframe, continued use of volunteers, and appreciation for their efforts.



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b) Proposed Pay Plan Update

Mr. Mickey Folsom, Assistant Fire Chief of Administration said we previously reviewed employee compensation. In 2021, Evergreen Solutions conducted a market analysis. Based on Evergreen Solution's market survey, the Fire Department's salaries were 12% below other departments within the state. The proposed solution was to create new pay grades using a salary of \$43,800 for firefighters. Step two is to bring employees to the minimum salary or increase salaries by 3% and take the salary to the closet step. The full implementation cost is \$2.8 million for the city of Columbia and Richland County at full staff.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager said two weeks ago, you all promoted 23 positions and they will have a responsibility as well to ensure that they communicate this, help you educate the firefighters, and hold them accountable for what we are presenting. If presented correctly, sustainability has to resonate from the boots on the ground. We want them to choose career paths where they want to be promoted, where they believe in the system, and where the culture is changing.

Mayor Rickenmann said if we make this adjustment, we will need a plan. We have to think about how this effects recruitment. I worry about our guys going to every wreck; it is not good for them or the equipment.

There was a brief discussion regarding resources, the fire contract, the need for equipment and backup equipment, safety, and seamless processes with partner agencies.

Mr. Aubrey D. Jenkins, Fire Chief said I am always out there with them because I worry about them. I want to do what is right for Columbia. We met with the division chiefs today to lay out expectations. I am calling a mandatory meeting with every chief officer in the department.

Councilor Duvall asked when we will reach a point where the city of Columbia is providing a countywide service and the county government buys into that service by helping us fund it.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager said they have to budget either way and they have to understand what the needs are. If we are going in this direction, the cost will be more. Simultaneously, we need to have discussions about the contract. We have a contractual relationship that we have to serve but that has not been the narrative over the years. We have to meet our costs and we have to know that the funds will be there.



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Councilor McDowell said a year ago, we fought to get a second set of bunker gear and firefighters are still asking when they will get the new gear.

Mr. Mickey Folsom, Assistant Fire Chief of Administration reported that the request for gear is going through the procurement process. It is grant funded and we have to do this the right way.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager said as we continue to work with Richland County, I wanted to make sure you all have clarity about fees and millage rates. I am hopeful that one option in particular will be a good solution if Columbia and Richland County move forward with the proposed pay plan.

Ms. Missy Caughman, CPM, Budget, Program Management and Grants Director explained that the fire hydrant fee was established in 1979. It is added to the water bill for all out-of-city customers. The residential rate is \$10 and it was last increased in July 2019. The fire service fee was also established in 1979. There was one increase in July 2015. It is applied to out-of-city customers and remitted to Richland County to help offset the cost of fire services. This is also remitted to the Irmo Fire District and Lexington County for properties located within city limits. The fire millage is set and collected by Richland County. Columbia receives its portion and the other jurisdictions receive their portion. It has been the same for the past five years.

There was a brief discussion related to a property tax audit, other funding sources, and the need to attach humanity, health, and safety to the service.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager said a millage increase would result in \$1.5 million in additional revenue for the city. There is one last item that will show up on the next meeting agenda. It is related to a consultant that Chief Jenkins has engaged.

Mr. William Broschious, Community Risk Reduction Division Chief said in previous conversations we were tasked with finding a consultant to conduct a study of fire service. We have completed the procurement process and the contract should be on your agenda soon. The scope includes four phases that will be completed over a six month period. Upon completion of the study, we should work on our five year strategic plan.

Mayor Rickenmann said you should ask the consultant about technology and other programs that can help fill the staffing void.



We Are Columbia

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Councilor Brennan asked how the study timeline will impact renegotiation of the fire services contract.

Mr. William Brosious, Community Risk Reduction Division Chief said Chief Jenkins is working on an extension. The goal is to complete the study before the extension expires. This study is designed to determine how the two agencies will work better as one.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 4:53 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Erika D. Moore Hammond, CMC
City Clerk