



Rachel Harlow-Schalk
316 North Park Avenue
Helena, MT 59623

: Phone: 406-447-8427
: Fax: 406-447-8434
: Email: rschalk@helenamt.gov

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MEMORANDUM

Date: Thursday, March 11, 2021
To: Mayor and Commissioners
From: Rachel Harlow-Schalk City Manager
Re: Follow-up Questions from Commissioners from the February 22, 2021 Update on Fire Service and Study Information

On February 3, 2021, I shared to you during an Administrative meeting concern brought to my attention from the Fire Department surrounding the City's status of conformance to the National Fire Protection Agency's response standard for fire and emergency medical service activities. During the February 22, 2021 Commission meeting, Fire Chief Wood provided a presentation on the impact of not having a third fire station including increased 911 calls for service, emergency response times, overlapping calls, and responder delay or even lack of response.

These presentations are just the beginning of a conversation with stakeholders and that this is not a conversation solely around which will include more than just the third fire station. This work is to address Fire and EMS service needs in Helena including forming a stakeholder task force to review the 2006 and 2008 studies, seek current information from staff about urban/wildland interface service and inter-local agreement needs, recommend improvements, and offer funding options. The fact that there was a 2006 and 2008 study which called out activities that have not been accomplished is not uncommon across the various operations in the city.

The Commission agreed to moving forward with studying the current fire service needs in the City with a stakeholder task force. That said, both during and after the February 22, 2021 Commission meeting questions were asked which staff and I have answered in the attached response. My hope is that these detailed operational clarifications sufficiently address these questions so that we may move forward as outlined in the Work Plan below. Clarification is needed from the Commission as to your support of the Work Plan, including establishing joint planning standards with the County that address emergency service impacts from community development activities.

City Commission Meeting February 22, 2021
Questions Asked
Responses from the City Manager

What is the Anticipated Work Plan for the Next Year?

Evaluate Current Services: Lead – Chief Wood

Recommendations to Commission: March 1, 2022

Hire a consultant to work with stakeholders and revise the 2006 and 2008 Studies. This work will include current information from staff including urban/wildland interface service needs as well as inter-local agreements, identify current needs, recommend improvements and offer funding options to include the establishment of a third Fire Station on the north end of the city.

Anticipated members of this requested task force include:

- Helena Citizens Council •Federal and State government •Rural Fire
- St. Peters Health •Helena College •Firefighter’s Union
- Fort Harrison •the VA Hospital •Helena Regional Airport
- Helena School system •Lewis and Clark County •East Helena

Community Planning: Lead – Sharon Haugen

Recommendations to Commission: April 1, 2022

Seek joint standards adoption through the Joint City/County Planning Commission as informed by a staff and community based advisory board. The primary focus will be addressing emergency connection or other emergent services expected to be provided by the City due to development including annexation requests from unincorporated areas. Emergency response services include police, fire, water, wastewater and transportation.

What are the Turnout Times in the Response Time?

Turn out time can be described as the time from when the Dispatch Center, dispatches a call to the time an emergency vehicle acknowledges the call and begins continuous travel to an incident. Firefighters capture this information during a call and report it to 9-1-1 dispatch along with the on-scene arrival time.

	Standard	Year 2010	Year 2020	Standard	Year 2010	Year 2020
	NFPA EMS	EMS	EMS	NFPA FIRE	FIRE	FIRE
Turnout Time	1:00	1:20	2:13	1:20	1:40	2:26
Travel Time	4:00	3:06	3:46	4:00	3:41	4:12
Total Response Time	5:00	4:26	5:59	5:20	5:21	6:38

It’s important to note, like many systems at the city, turnout times are captured manually by dispatchers and time recordings can be inaccurate due to normal delays in human response time complicated further by the number of calls coming into dispatch.

The response times are only a portion of an overall picture. Additional concerns include the quality of service, the growing threat of fire in the urban wildland interface and our ability to grow our emergency services (fire, police, water, wastewater and transportation) as our population grows.

The 2006 Study identified issues with the accuracy in tracking response times (as noted above) and opted to use GIS travel time mapping technology to provide more accurate data. A third station was recommended in part because travel time alone exceeds the recommended 4 minutes travel time. Adding turnout times of 60 to 80 seconds (the NFPA standard) only pushes the city further out of compliance. The time disparity is more noticeable north of the railroad tracks.

ZONE (2010/2015/2020)	AVERAGE RESPONSE TIME in minutes (Dispatch to Arrived)				
	2010	2015	2020	Projected 2025 Times	Average 5 yr. rate of increase
1 - Airport/N of Railroad Tracks/E of Montana Ave	6:17	6:51	7:37	8:17	40
5 - N of Railroad Tracks/W of Montana Ave	5:41	6:58	7:16	8:04	48
2 - S of Railroad Tracks/E of Interstate 15	5:07	5:55	6:55	7:49	54
8 - S of Railroad Tracks/W of Benton & Park Ave & W Main/ E of City Limits	4:56	5:57	6:23	7:07	44
4 - S of Railroad Tracks/W of Interstate 15/N of 11th Ave/E of Montana Ave	4:08	4:33	5:21	5:58	37
9 - Westside Fire Service Area	6:23	7:18	8:03	8:53	50
6 - S of Railroad Tracks/W of Montana Ave/N of Broadway/E of Benton & Park	4:31	4:54	5:28	5:57	29
7 - S of Broadway/W of Montana Ave/E of Park Ave & W Main	4:57	5:36	6:06	6:41	35
3 - S of 11th Ave/W of Interstate 15/E of Montana Ave	4:59	5:38	6:21	7:02	41
0 - Any call out of our response area/including mutual aid calls	13:24	26:23:00	12:59	NA	NA

What is the increase in the mileage of streets, a general increase in the number of subdivisions and an increase in overall population?

Streets Data

State Fiscal Year	Helena FT Mileage
2006	202.513
2021	258.641

City streets have increased by 30% which equates to an added 56 miles. City limits have gone from 15.21 square miles to 16.86 square miles.

Number of Subdivisions Added

Additional residential areas include: North Benton Ave. and Green Meadow subdivisions, Happy Homes,

Mountain View Meadows east, Multiple phases of 1 and 2 family dwellings at Mount View Homes for a total of five new areas not including the potential new westside subdivision, new apartments at Brady and Henderson, and new apartments across from Walmart all of which are in various stages of planning.

Other New or Planned Growth in Helena Since the 2006

COSTCO, Boeing, LOWES, Home Depot, BCBS, WinCo Foods, Super 1, Residence Inn, Farmers State Bank, Carrol College Physical Training Center, Bryant School, Central School, Flying Giant Family fun center, Sleeping Giant Homes (Lola Street), State of Montana records storage building (1700 National), addition to Pioneer Aviation, new Robert Peccia Building (off Saddle Drive), three new buildings for Golden Eagle Construction (off Shepherd Drive), and new buildings at Bill Roberts Golf Course.

Population Change

In 2000, 26,163 people lived in Helena, in 2010 there were 28,809, and in 2019 there were 33,124 Helenans as published by the U.S. Census Bureau in the Census and in their 2019 American Community Survey respectively. Between 2000 and 2019, the city grew 21%. In these years, the only change to the City's fire service has been an increase of staff in 2018. In the same U.S. Census Bureau data sets, Lewis & Clark County had 55,716 in 2000, 63,394 in 2010, and a projected 69,432 in 2019. Between 2000 and 2019, the county grew 20%.

As a destination for employment for many who live outside the city limits, it is estimated the city serves as many as two to three times our population. This is not a new occurrence, but it isn't sustainable. Completing a revision of the 2006 and 2008 studies will clarify impacts and provide a clearer picture of current fire service needs based on update population information.

What is the methodology for Response Projections?

The specific response type (fire or EMS) was calculated over 10 years to identify an annual response per year. This average was then multiplied out five years starting from the 2020 data to the 2025 projections.

What are the financial impacts: cost estimates up front property, construction, staffing?

This question assumes we are only interested in a Fire Station. The interest is in understanding the needs related to current fire service, wildland urban interface issues and the impacts of another 10,000 population outside the city boundary. Broadening the conversation creates an opportunity for investments from unusual partners or other national funding sources available for fire service. Sources include loans, corporate giving, FEMA's Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grant (Helena has received this grant in the past), and COVID response funding grants (which could include CDBG, if the service area meets the national objectives). Voter approved measures, like mill levy or obligation debt, would need to be evaluated based upon viability given the actual need along with fees for service or impact fees. If there is a substantial need for improved fire training facilities, many rural agencies and districts may invest as partners. This information needs to be prepared as part an update to the 2006 and 2008 studies.

The following estimates are provided by staff based on researched costs associated with similar projects around Montana for a fire station.

Fire Station - \$8,000,000

Training building - \$450,000 (increased to reflect excavation, foundation, etc.)

Large Equipment (Engine, Rescue Vehicle) \$825,000
 Staffing from 9 to 18 FTE: \$1 million to \$2 million per year

How does Helena compare with other Fire Departments?

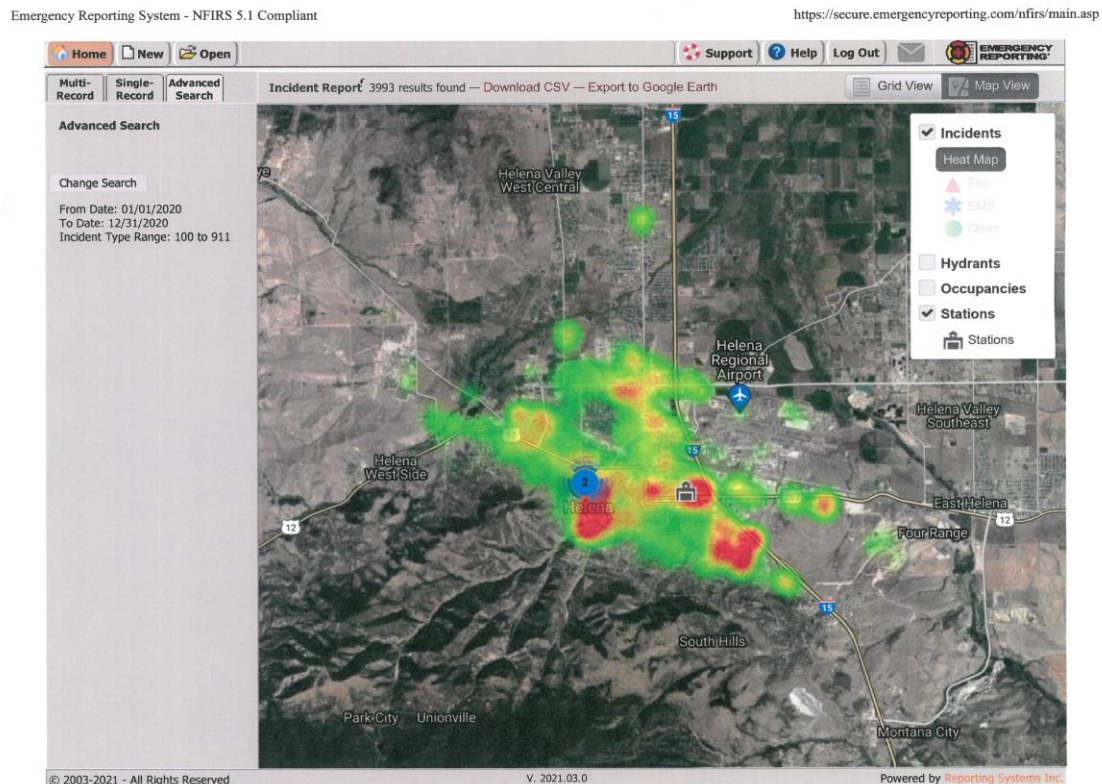
City	Stations	Staff	City Pop	Pop./Sta.	Pop./Staff
*Billings	7	110	109,577	15,653	996
*Bozeman	3	48	49,831	16,610	1038
Butte/Silver Bow	2	35	33,964	16,982	970
Great Falls	4	65	58,434	14,608	898
Helena	2	36	33,124	16,562	920
Kalispell	2	32	24,565	12,282	767
Missoula	5	80	75,516	15,103	943
Average	3.6	58	55002	15400	933

*Billings and Bozeman are in the process of adding fire stations.

Please reflect on the population change over time in Helena. The difficulty in comparing these services is the assumption that services are like for like. The advantage of revising the 2006 and 2008 Studies is the ability for the city to reflect on the services offered and needs in the Helena community that exist today.

Provide a map or maps (sometimes referred to as heat maps) that show the distribution and frequency of calls throughout the response area.

Call volume heat map: 2020



Additional Concerns and Responses Expressed by the Commission

Concern: Delayed and “unable to respond” calls are only 1.3 % to .5% of call volume per year and only pose a problem when units need to respond out of their area on a second call or when a third call comes in.

Response: As was shared in the Commission meeting, understanding the issues facing the city with emergency response requires updated data to inform decisions about what we are constructing and why. The data cited in this question does not reflect the current community needs.

From Chief Wood – “Overlapping calls are an expression of community demand on the Fire Department. With two stations we have the capacity to respond to more than one call at a time. An overlap rate of 37% means we are experiencing times when call volume exceeds the totality of our response capabilities. This excess is compounded when call types require more resources such as fires, rescues, motor vehicle accidents, or hazardous materials responses.”

Concern: In the case of EMS, it is important for the Commission and the public to know that in our tiered EMS response system, we are not the sole medical responder so, in many cases, medical coverage is adequately provided. It is not as if our residents are hanging out there with no help. In the case of a structure fire where all resources are committed, the next call will always be “unable to respond” until an incident commander can break resources loose, staff can be called in or mutual aid requested. That would be the case even if we had four stations.

Response: Thank you. This is a technical matter that requires the Chief’s response, as it is an operational question. The broader issues facing the community require updated information so that we can make better decisions around what to construct and why. These current issues include services, the urban wildland interface and the impact development has on our emergency response services which include police, fire, water, wastewater and transportation.

From Chief Wood – “St. Peter’s Ambulance Service (SPAS) is a contracted transport service and is the sole transporting agency responding to all EMS calls in the City and Lewis and Clark County. If the Helena Fire Department is unable to respond (depending on the call volume of the day) there may not be adequate medical coverage due to the ambulance service response. This is not always the case depending on the nature of the EMS call. In 2016/2017 Emergency Medical Dispatching (EMD) was implemented. EMD uses protocols approved by EMD and our local Medical Director, to prioritize EMS calls, into a ‘standard’ and ‘priority’ tiered response. Helena Fire is only dispatched to priority calls unless SPAS is not available or needs further assistance. The EMS calls to which Helena Fire responds are ‘priority’ calls and typically require both an ambulance crew and fire crew thus requiring a Helena Fire response. The following are some, (not all) examples of when a fire department response is crucial for positive health outcomes:

Motor vehicle accidents involving injuries – 32; Cardiac arrest – 18; Stroke – 50; Heart Attack – 144; Breathing problem – 225; Diabetic Emergencies – 32; Seizures – 133; Patients with disabilities needing to be moved or transported; Trauma patients – 51; Entrapment with injuries; Suicide attempts – 31; Accidental poisonings – 54; Assault – 22; Falls – 231. (2020 data)

Concern: Incorporate all six bullet point recommendations into a follow-up study

Response: Thank you. Below are the recommendations as copied from the 2008 report to ensure we are addressing all of them. I believe the point is to ensure we:

- Address staffing needs and hire the Fire Inspector.
- Hire the Fire Inspector.
- Build a capital reserve (there is no capital reserve policy for the city; one would need to be written to apply to all depts. not just Fire).
- Establish a capital replacement program (a written capital replacement program needs to be created for the city, not just the fire department).
- Ask the City Commission to set a response time benchmark for measurement against by the department.
- Build a third fire station. The 2008 recommendation shared, "Development trends show an additional City of Helena fire station will be needed in approximately 5 years."

**Fire Service Planning Committee Report to the Helena City Commission
Completed in December of 2007, commonly called the 2008 Study**

**FIRE SERVICE PLANNING COMMITTEE
RECOMMENDATIONS**

Fire Department Priority Recommendations

While the FSPC used an open discussion format throughout its review it was agreed upon to use a secret ballot to vote on the final recommendations to the commission. Not all of the committee members voted. The State of Montana representative abstained and three members did not attend enough meetings to make an informed vote. City staff did not participate in the voting.

Priority considerations and FSPC recommendations are as follows:

- 1. Additional Firefighters:** Add 9 firefighters to better staff fire suppression needs.
Vote - Unanimous *\$544,833 Annual Cost Estimate*
 - a. Issue - Add nine firefighters to existing operations to allow the fire crews at fire stations #1 and #2 to work within an adequate and consistent operating force of four firefighters each and assures consistency to the emergency response. Secondly, it will allow the Battalion Chief of each shift to function as a full-time supervisor, not the dual role (firefighter and supervisor) they currently do. By eliminating the dual role we will be enhancing the fire operation by establishing clear roles and appropriate skills and competency, in addition to making the firefighter's job safer.
 - b. Funding – The FSPC recommends a on-going Public Safety Levy
- 2. Additional Fire Inspector:** Hire 1 new fire inspector for the fire prevention bureau.
Vote – 9 to 1 in favor *\$70,511 Annual Cost Estimate*
 - a. Issue: This new position will manage the Company Inspection Program and focus upon small retail/office inspections. This increase will allow the current inspector to focus on the higher risk occupancies.
 - b. Funding - The FSPC recommends an on-going Public Safety Levy

3. Capital Reserves for Buildings: Fire Station #2.

Vote - Unanimous *\$107,762 Annual Cost Estimate for ten years*

- a. Issue - The City's east-side station (Station #2) is in desperate need of an upgrade and remodel in order to better meet the current and future service needs provided from that location.
- b. Funding - The FSPC recommends that funding would be sunset with the completion of the loan.

4. Capital Replacement Program: Establish an equipment replacement program

Vote – 8 to 2 in favor *\$245,000 Annual Cost Estimate*

- a. Issue - The FSPC believes it is prudent to establish an ongoing funding mechanism for replacement of capital equipment and current facility repair and upkeep.
- b. Funding - The FSPC recommends an on-going Public Safety Levy

5. City Commission supported Response Times: The City Commission should direct the Fire Chief to establish a department-wide response time. *No Costs*

Vote – Unanimous

- a. Issue – The FSPC believes it beneficial for fire department operations to establish an official response benchmark. Such action allows the community and the department to measure expectations and performance. A 90 % attainment level is also recommended.
- b. Funding – no levy is needed.

6. Future Station Needs – Third Fire Station: Begin preliminary steps for a future fire station.

- a. Issue -Development trends show an additional City of Helena fire station will be needed in approximately 5 years. Preliminary planning steps are recommended to begin at this time:
 - 1. Identify complimentary partnerships for a multi-purpose public safety facility.
 - 2. Location Determination
 - 3. Facility / Station Design
 - 4. Preparatory staff hiring and training
 - 5. Sustainable Funding Source
- b. Funding - Funding for preliminary steps should be included in the General Fund (pending Commission approval)