

SUMMER RESIDENTS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

POSITION STATEMENT ON CHATHAM FIRE STATION STUDY

August, 2011

Introduction

The Summer Residents Advisory Committee has studied the report prepared by Municipal Resources, Inc. and discussed its recommendations at length. Chief Ambriscoe made time to meet with members of the Committee for two hours on June 30, 2011 to tour the current fire station on Depot Road and discuss the design of the future fire station. We observed that the current station is in poor repair and can hardly contain equipment and personnel. The station needs to be replaced and the Committee supports doing so at the current location.

Recommendations of Municipal Resources, Inc.

Two Fire Station Configuration

Municipal Resources, Inc. ("MRI") recommends building a new main fire station at the current Depot Road location and adding a new substation in South Chatham at Routes 28 and 137, to provide quicker response to emergency calls from South Chatham. The Committee has three concerns with this recommendation. One is the need for two fire stations in a community as small as Chatham in land space. The second is the cost to build two stations. And the third is the impact on the operating budget of the Town because of increased manpower that will be required to adequately operate at two locations.

With respect to need, Chatham is small geographically. There is no place in Chatham a significant distance from the fire station on Depot Road. The most distant points from the station are the end of Strong Island Road at 3.8 miles, the end of Pleasant Street at 4.1 miles and the end of Tilipi Run at 3.0 miles, all reachable by the fire department within the National Fire Protection Association Standard of eight minutes from the receipt of a call.

MRI recommends that the substation be built to reduce response time to South Chatham to less than 6 minutes. It proposes to put the substation at the intersection of Routes 28 and 137, seventh tenths of a mile from the Chatham- Harwich Port border. While it is true that in South Chatham the response time is likely longer than in areas of the Town closer to the Depot Road station, that is also true for significant parts of the Town. But we are still talking about relatively short distances. In addition the East Harwich Fire Station is less than 2 miles from the proposed location for the South Chatham substation and is available for emergency response to South Chatham under the Town's mutual aid agreement with Harwich.

The estimate for the new station on Depot Road is \$8.3 Million. One estimate for the substation is \$1.4 Million. There is some potential for savings at the Depot Road facility if it needed one less bay and two or three less bunk rooms, but that is likely to yield very small savings in construction costs. The addition of a substation will likely increase the total cost of the project by 15% or more. With the number of long term capital projects just recently completed or underway and not paid for, any incremental capital expense for the fire station is a concern.

The Committee's third concern is with the MCI's recommendation for staffing the two fire stations. MRI recommends transferring dispatch to a regional center and reassigning the fire fighter currently performing the dispatch function on each shift to emergency response. It then recommends splitting shift personnel between the two stations, 3/3 in the heavy volume months and 3/2 in the lighter ones. Currently the department has 22 fire fighters divided into shifts of 6. Because of two vacancies, two of the shifts have 5 fire fighters. MRI recommends filling these two vacancies.

By shifting personnel to the second station, the number of fire fighters assigned to the main station will be 50% below current levels. The problem with this staffing level is that if a call comes in when the firemen at the Depot Road station are out on a call or hospital transport, the response time from the South Chatham sub-station to the east side of Chatham, including Main Street, Chathamport, North Chatham, the Old Village or Morris Island could double, clearly failing to meet the recommended 8 minute response time. In July 2010 there were 321 emergency responses. That is about ten a day, so this situation is likely to occur. It is a situation that should be unacceptable to the Town. When it was suggested that the new Fire Station be built near the new Police Station on George Ryder Road as a more central location, that location was rejected as being too distant from where the majority of the emergency calls originate.

MRI does recommend adding four more firefighters later on, in the addition to filling current vacancies. It suggests that the Town apply for federal SAFER grants to fund their training and their first two years of compensation. The third year on would be on the Town's operating budget. The Committee estimates the annual cost for four fire fighters would be \$324,000 in salaries and benefits (\$81,00 x 4). Added to the two hired to fill current vacancies, the total annual cost for new personnel recommended by the MRI would be \$486,000.

These additions would bring the complement of fire fighters to 7 per shift, still not enough to properly staff the main station at Depot Road, if three are deployed to the South Chatham substation. The more reasonable staffing would be to leave the Depot Road with a headcount of 22 or 24 fire fighters and staff the substation with 8 fire fighters, four shifts of 2, with backup coming from Depot Road. The annual cost of 8 additional fire fighters would be \$648,000 for salaries and benefits.

The Committee believes that a substation in South Chatham is not necessary to provide acceptable levels of protection for the Town and the incremental reduction in response time for one portion of the community does not justify the cost likely to be incurred in building and staffing a second fire station.

Dispatch, Training Facilities, Fire Fighting Equipment

The Committee has previously expressed its concern over the budget challenge of the Fire Department's overtime, which the MRI identified as 57% higher than average. MRI made several recommendations addressing this problem and the Committee supports these recommendations.

- . Transfer dispatch operations to a regional center and redeploy the fire fighter currently performing these duties on each shift to emergency response. Chatham is the only town on the Cape using fire fighters as dispatchers. Use of one fire fighter per shift as a dispatcher reduces available personnel for emergency response by one and is one of the principal drivers of high overtime in the department. Firefighters will continue to be available to provide first aid and blood pressure monitoring to Chatham residents as they do now, except on those occasions when all personnel are out on calls or transport.
- . Add training facilities in the new station to permit on-shift training
- . Except when necessitated by the nature of the medical emergency, reduce the number of fire fighters transporting a patient to Cape Cod Hospital from three to two and return the third fire fighter to the station.

Finally, MRI recommends adding a quint (a combination ladder truck and pumper) to the station's equipment. Housing built over the past fifteen years in Chatham, much of it occupied by non-resident taxpayers, has trended to larger homes than have historically been built in Chatham. With larger homes come greater challenges for the Fire Department in fighting fires and for which the Committee believes the department is not currently equipped. The Committee is convinced that this equipment is needed to fight fires in the larger, taller structures and to protect our fire fighters by avoiding the need to fight fires by standing on the roofs of burning buildings.