



**Worcester
Municipal
Research
Bureau**

An Independent Voice For Responsible Government

*Report No. 96-3
March 28, 1996*

WORCESTER FIRE DEPARTMENT NEEDS COMPREHENSIVE STUDY

This report suggests that the City should contract with an outside consultant for a comprehensive examination of the Worcester Fire Department.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several months there has been discussion, sometimes animated, among members of Webster Square and Main South neighborhood organizations, the Fire Department, and the City administration. The discussion centers on the Webster Square Fire Station, and focuses on two issues: first, the condition of the station, whether a new station should be built, and if so, where it should be located; second, whether the existing location of firefighting apparatus, and in particular of one truck (Ladder No. 4), is the most effective deployment of the department's equipment. One result of these discussions was a proposal by the administration that an outside consultant be hired in order to provide an independent and objective perspective on these issues. The original request for proposals (RFP) that resulted called for a citywide and comprehensive examination of the Fire Department, as well as the Webster Square issues. This was later narrowed to a study of "current activities performed by the Fire Department citywide, with a specific focus on the Webster Square area." The City Manager's request for funding for this latter, narrower study was rejected by City Council. In rejecting the proposal, Council members cited concern over the expenditure involved, and an expectation that administration officials should be able to resolve the questions concerning the fire station without outside assistance.

The City Council's consideration of the study proposal was focused on the Webster Square situation. Viewed in isolation, the proposal may well have merited rejection for the reasons cited. However, the Research Bureau believes that a *comprehensive* study would in fact be a timely and worthwhile endeavor for the City. A study of this sort would not be primarily or solely concerned with the Webster Square fire station, but would examine the operations and present status of the Fire Department in its entirety.¹ Such a study is warranted by changes occurring both in the City itself, and in the fire protection profession. It would cost the City somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100,000. A

¹The International Association of Fire Fighters, at the request of the Worcester local, is in the late stages of preparing a report on one of the Webster Square issues, the best location of Ladder No. 4. This report could conceivably form part of the comprehensive study the Bureau is proposing.

consultant charged with undertaking such a comprehensive examination should be expected to consider questions such as those outlined below.

ISSUES FOR STUDY

1. Fire stations and other facilities. Department facilities are, if anything, in worse condition than when they were examined by the Business Task Force for More Effective Government study some 2–1/2 years ago. The issue currently being debated in regard to Webster Square—whether to rehabilitate or rebuild the station, and if the latter, where the new station should be located—will reappear as other stations such as Brown Square and Tatnuck Square continue to age and deteriorate. However, the question of where a station should be located to maximize its fire protection efficiency cannot be answered in isolation from consideration of the City as a whole in regard to the present location of other fire stations, demographic trends, and likely areas of economic and/or residential development. Given that such issues are likely to be recurring ones, it makes sense to undertake a comprehensive, strategic analysis, so that future fire protection needs can be anticipated and met in a coordinated fashion. Such a strategic analysis should include a prioritization of needs, since the City may well lack the fiscal resources to meet all of the needs identified by this analysis.

Any study should include consideration of the department's training and maintenance facilities. In regard to the latter, an important issue is whether it would be more cost-effective for the City to contract out the maintenance of fire equipment; this is a particularly timely question, given that the department's maintenance facilities, as currently configured, do not accommodate some of the department's equipment. The department estimates that an expenditure of at least \$500,000 would be required to rectify this situation.

2. Equipment. Is the city using the best type and mix of fire-suppression equipment? Other cities have begun to introduce innovative types of equipment. Louisville, for example, is now using "Quints," which are multi-purpose trucks equipped with an aerial ladder and a pump; each of these vehicles replaces a pumper and a ladder truck. And fire departments in cities such as Fort Worth, TX and Scottsdale, AZ are now using "mini-pumpers" to respond to non-structural fires, and even to provide the initial response to some structural fires. A study should consider whether such units would increase the efficiency of the Fire Department's current mix of equipment, and whether they would reduce operating costs.

3. Fire prevention and education. A critical area of any independent overview of the Fire Department's operations should be the investigation of opportunities for increased efforts at fire prevention and education. There are increasing calls within the firefighting profession for fire departments to shift part of their attention away from fire suppression and towards fire prevention. These calls have risen in response to the contemporary conditions in which fire departments operate. The number of structure fires has been steadily falling across the United States for the past two decades, due to improvements in such areas as construction and code requirements. This means that the most fruitful ground for further decreases in property loss and death due to fire is in fire prevention: **inspecting** buildings for potential fire hazards and code violations, and **educating** citizens about how to minimize these risks and practice fire safety, and about measures to take when confronted with a fire. Over the last decade, this decrease in the number of structure fires has been accompanied by fiscal constraints affecting all services at the local government level, including fire protection. These issues point to a need to rethink the numbers and the use of fire personnel. Increasing the emphasis on fire prevention is a legitimate and indeed necessary expansion of a fire department's activities, which holds out the promise of more effective delivery of the service for which it is responsible. In the words of the Massachusetts State

Fire Marshal, "Little money is expended by communities on fire prevention. It is viewed as an expense without definable payback. It should be viewed as an investment; as part of a municipal risk management plan."

Calls for movement in this direction made up a number of the recommendations of the 1993 Business Task Force for More Effective Government Report on the Fire Department. Although the department has made significant strides in this direction, the Research Bureau believes that an overview should examine other areas where these efforts might be pursued. Possible areas would include a comprehensive program of scheduled inspections of residential buildings (one- and two-family residences and apartments), where the majority of fire loss and death occurs; strengthening commitment to fire prevention and education by establishing a separate line item for these functions in the department budget; and increasing the number and professional status of personnel dedicated to these functions. Above all, any study should evaluate the prospects for and benefits of a comprehensive shift of the department in this direction, a shift akin in a sense to the re-orientation of many police departments towards community policing. Such a shift might require a significant alteration in the department's approach to fire protection, including sustained and coordinated organizational outreach to the community, and a change in perspective on the part of firefighting personnel, with the aim of making fire prevention a departmental commitment and a daily priority.

4. *Emergency medical response.* The question who should provide this service will become an important issue in the near future, as the University of Massachusetts Medical Center contract with the City, through which emergency medical service (EMS) is currently provided for Worcester, expires in December 1997. If UMass or the City decline to renew the contract, the City will have to find a new EMS provider. One possibility would be for the Fire Department to assume this service; the department has expressed some interest in doing so. Across the country, fire departments have increasingly looked to provide emergency medical service in the face of steady declines in the number of fires (and hence, less demand on their personnel for fire suppression). In fact, by state law, the Fire Department already provides "first response" to emergency situations in the city. However, a thorough analysis of the costs and benefits of the Fire Department providing EMS needs to be carried out prior to any such assumption of this service by the department. This analysis should include such considerations as the particular costs to the City of billing for this service and the likely proportion of bills that would go uncollected; startup and ongoing expenditures that would be incurred for equipment; whether the department could provide this service with existing personnel or would require additional personnel; and, the comparative cost of having fire personnel versus private companies provide this service.

5. *Personnel and work rules.* What is the optimum number of firefighting personnel for the city? After serious cutbacks at the beginning of the decade, the last few years have seen a significant expansion of the Fire Department's uniformed complement. Currently, there are roughly 475 uniformed officers and firefighters, with plans to add another class sometime in fiscal year 1997 (this class will not increase the number of personnel, but will maintain the department's current strength). It may well be that other responsibilities progressively assumed by the department—for example, rescues of various kinds, hazardous materials responses, first response to emergency medical situations—demand a force of the current size, in spite of declines in the number of building fires. This would be an important question for investigation by an outside consultant, as would questions of whether the force was structured appropriately in light of these other responsibilities (for example, should a truck with four firefighters respond to even minor fire emergencies such as trash or car fires?). A significant percentage (almost 10% in FY96) of the City's municipal services budget is spent on fire protection, and of that more than 95% is spent on personnel. Given

the likelihood of renewed fiscal pressures and constraints arising from a variety of sources in the near future, the question of the size and character of the complement needed to provide adequate fire services for Worcester is a crucial one. This question can only be adequately answered after review of a range of other considerations, including the following:

- Work-week, shifts, and schedules. For example, do shifts deploy personnel in the most efficient manner? Are more personnel on duty during periods when most fires and other calls occur, fewer on duty when fewer responses occur?
- Span of control. Of the Fire Department's 475 uniformed personnel, some 120 are officers (i.e., supervisory personnel). Is this an appropriate number of supervisory personnel in relation to firefighters? Does the Fire Department need 1 supervisor for every 3 line personnel in order to adequately carry out its responsibilities?
- Type of equipment used by the department. If the department began introducing the types of equipment discussed above, one result might be a comparative reduction in the number of personnel required to operate the trucks; for example, use of mini-pumpers to respond to non-structural fires (which were 36% of total fires in Worcester in 1994) would typically reduce the number of firefighters responding from 4 to 2.
- Duties of personnel besides actual fire suppression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Webster Square and Main South groups apparently shared in formulating the original suggestion that an outside consultant be hired. This suggests that they too believed that such an outside source could provide an independent, objective determination of the issues with which they were concerned. To ensure that these groups regard the process as unbiased, the City should involve them in some way in formulating those parts of the RFP that directly pertain to Webster Square.
- Any consultant hired by the City to examine the Fire Department should be charged with a wide scope of investigation encompassing the sorts of issues discussed above, including a strategic overview of the department's orientation, and consideration of the issue of EMS. This would entail a more comprehensive investigation than either of those proposed by the administration thus far. Accordingly, it is crucial that the City's request for proposals for such a study be written in a way that ensures that these issues will receive prominent consideration.
- The consultant should be specifically charged with providing comparative analysis of fire department services and personnel and fire losses in other cities as part of the study.
- The consultant should also develop a multi-year capital plan to accompany the study's recommendations, as well as an implementation plan for any recommended changes in deployment or number of personnel.