

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 11, 2006

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO #113: REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON FALSE FIRE AND POLICE FALSE ALARMS.

This is in response to questions from Council members Krupicka and McDonald concerning fees for false fire and police alarms.

False Fire Alarms

During FY 2005, the Fire Department resources worth approximately \$1.7 million could be allocated to False Alarm calls (see Attachment 1 for calculations). Most of the resources represented the fixed cost of providing 24/7 coverage in the City and not incremental costs. Information is coded on incident reports by firefighters to reflect "false alarms." False alarms can be accidental or malicious (or a combination of both); however, records do not distinguish between these causes. All false alarms are totaled in one field. The attached spreadsheet shows the number of false alarms for Fiscal Year 2004 and 2005.

There are no automated alarm systems that directly "ring" in Fire Communications. The alarms that are received in Fire Communications are from private alarm companies, which notify us when an alarm is activated. On-site alarms that are activated at the site by a human are limited to the Life Safety Alert System.¹

Staff contacted other local jurisdictions regarding false fire alarm fees; however, the information was not available in time for this report. Staff will provide the report on local jurisdictions false alarm fees once it is provided to us.

Historically, the City has not collected fees for Fire false alarms, because the City wanted to encourage the prompt reporting of potential fires. However, once we have reviewed the prevailing practices in other jurisdictions, I will ask staff to review this historic City practice of not charging for false Fire alarms.

¹ Fire has a Life Safety Alert Program with about 130 citizens who are "medically challenged," and they have hand-held devices that allow them to push a button for help. The units also have a smoke detector attached that will send an alarm to Fire Communications if a fire occurs.

On an immediate basis, the Fire Protection Systems Unit (FPSU) of the Code Enforcement Bureau investigates all accidental fire alarm system incidents that involve equipment problems to determine a course of action to correct the problem. When a problem cannot be addressed or corrected immediately, a Notice of Violation is issued and the fire alarm system is placed on "Fire Watch." The Fire Watch requires the system to be placed out of service and individuals employed by the property owner monitor the facility until the system is returned to normal ready service. The FPSU monitors the property and performs followup inspections to confirm the systems integrity.

On a systematic and risk-based platform, the Fire Protection System Unit witnesses the code required annual fire protection system inspection and testing of all types of fire protection systems, including fire alarm systems to ensure they are being inspected, tested, services, and maintained in an effort to reduce false alarms. To date, the program has identified and required correction of many fire alarm system problems that could have cause false alarms. If a false fire alarm is malicious, then criminal penalties can be sought through the Fire Marshal's office.

False Security Alarms

According to the Alexandria Police Department, it is unknown how many residential/commercial security alarm there are in the City of Alexandria and the City does not require a fee for systems to be installed, nor does the City require that residential/commercial alarms be registered in the City. No residential/commercial alarms are hooked up to the Police Department. All alarms are received by the alarm company who in turn notify the Police Department.

From January 1, 2005 - December 31, 2005 the Police Department received 6,524 alarm calls. A total of 2, 559 alarms were sited as being false. The remaining were either good alarms or the alarms were determined to be set off by nature/storm, maintenance/repair or malfunction. City Code Sec 4.4-4 Charge for False Alarms notes how the false alarm are billed. The first false alarm charge is \$35; subsequent false alarm charges within six months are \$50 each.² The department does not break down the alarms by type i.e. residential, commercial or a car alarm. In FY 2005 \$39,195 in false alarm fees were collected.

Attachment: Cost of False Alarms FY 2004 and FY 2005

² Code Section 4.4-4: Service charges shall be imposed, in accordance with this section, for false alarms which result in a response by one or more police officers to protected premises. No service charge shall be imposed for the first false alarm in any six-month period which results in a response by one or more police officers to the protected premises. A service charge of \$35 shall be imposed for the next false alarm which results in a police response to the same premises, if the alarm occurs within six months of the first false alarm. A service charge of \$50 shall be imposed for the next false alarm which results in a police response to the same premises, if the alarm occurs within six months of a false alarm for which a \$35 service charge was imposed under this section. A service charge of \$50 shall be imposed for every subsequent false alarm which results in a police response to the same premises and which occurs within six months of a false alarm for which a \$50 service charge was imposed under this section.

COST OF FALSE ALARMS--FY 2004 & FY 2005		
Alexandria Fire Department		
	<u>FY 2004</u>	<u>FY 2005</u>
Responses by Fire To Fire Incidents	15,696	14,339
Responses by Fire to EMS incidents	<u>8,073</u>	<u>7,022</u>
TOTAL -- Number/Responses*	23,769	21,361
Expenditures by Cost Center/Fire	\$14,676,587	\$14,913,370
Cost Per Response	\$617.47	\$698.16
Add in 20% Overhead**	<u>\$123</u>	<u>\$140</u>
Approx. Cost Per Response	\$741	\$838
Number of False Alarms***	1,979	2,019
Estimated Expenditures for False Alarms	\$1,466,439	\$1,691,922
<i>Source: Alexandria Fire Department Budget Data</i>		
* Includes the number of times that firefighters "went out through the door" to respond to <u>both</u> Fire and EMS incidents.		
** Overhead includes Fire Communications, Fire Vehicle/Equipment Maintenance, Fire Training, Fire Administration and Health & Safety.		
***Usually only one apparatus (engine or pumper) responds to a false alarm.		