

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MARCH 15, 2002
TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL
FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER
SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO # 3 : ESTABLISHMENT OF A FIRE PROTECTION SYSTEMS INSPECTION AND TESTING UNIT AND CONSIDERATION OF AN INCREASE IN FIRE PROTECTION SYSTEM PERMIT FEES

ISSUE: City Council consideration of the establishment of a fully-fee supported Fire Protection Systems Inspection and Testing Unit within the Code Enforcement Bureau and consideration of an increase in Fire Protection System permit fees to support the costs of this new unit.

RECOMMENDATIONS: That City Council:

- (1) Approve the addition of 3 full-time employees, 2 overhire positions and the upgrade of 1 position to staff a new Fire Protection Systems Inspection and Testing Unit within Code Enforcement; and
(2) Authorize the increase of Fire Protection System permit fees from \$12 per \$1,000 of total construction costs to \$35 per \$1,000 of total construction costs, and for fire alarm devices from \$75 minimum plus \$2 per device to \$75 minimum plus \$9 per device, through the approval of the attached resolution.

DISCUSSION: The New Construction Section of the Code Enforcement Bureau is responsible for the structural, architectural, electrical, mechanical, plumbing, gas and fire protection systems inspections of all new and existing buildings in the City. In FY 2001, this section conducted 57,356 inspections, compared with 35,519 inspections conducted in FY 2000. This represents an increase of over 61 percent. To meet this workload increase many of the staff inspectors are certified to perform inspections in more than one discipline and may perform a variety of inspections during a single workday. This increasing workload has had the greatest impact on fire inspections resulting in insufficient time for staff to properly conduct fire protection system inspections and tests based on industry standards, established inspection, testing and acceptance guidelines and mandated requirements. As a result, Code Enforcement has proposed the implementation of a new Fire Systems Inspection and Testing Protocol to clearly establish the

minimum personnel, time commitments and equipment required to perform the inspection of newly installed fire protection systems as required by Section 36-39 of the Code of Virginia and the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code, while meeting the City's requirement that all scheduled building and trade inspections be completed within two days. The new protocol will also establish uniform test procedures and standard operating procedures that will ensure all systems are functioning properly.

In calendar year 2000, 3,500 staff hours were dedicated to fire protection systems testing. However, based on the requirements of the proposed protocol, the same number of inspections in calendar year 2000 would have required 6,000 staff hours.

The inspection of fire protection systems generally requires more time and staff than other building and trade inspections since different systems must be operated and observed under simulated fire conditions, operated within specified time parameters, be observed for two-hour periods or require 100 percent device testing and verification. These tests require two to six people where other trade and building inspections usually require only one person. Due to the unique nature and time required to perform fire protection systems testing and the increasing workload due to the significant increase in new construction in the City, current staff is unable to dedicate the time required to properly inspect and test these critical systems. Therefore, Code Enforcement has proposed the establishment of a special unit within the division's New Construction Section dedicated solely to fire protection systems inspection, plan review and acceptance testing.

The establishment of a new Fire Protection Systems Inspection and Testing Unit will require the upgrade and addition of the following six positions:

- 1) The upgrade of one Fire Protection Engineer to a management level position to administer the program and ensure that the process from plan review to final inspection is properly implemented and executed;
- 2) The addition of one Fire Protection Plan Reviewer dedicated to the plan review process to ensure proper scrutiny and timely turn around of all submitted fire protection system plans;
- 3) The addition of three Fire Systems Inspectors dedicated to fire protection system inspection and testing to help manage the projected workload and avoid the delays that are attributable to insufficient staffing levels. One position will be permanent, while two will be temporary overhire positions;
- 4) The addition of one Engineering Aide committed to fire protection systems inspection scheduling, database management, fire protection system plan submittal processing, permit processing, the prevention of inspection and test backlogs and other related duties.

Establishing a Fire Protection Systems Inspection and Testing Unit will help to ensure that fire protection systems are properly designed and installed. Establishing this unit will also result in a significant reduction (50 percent to 21 percent) in the number of electrical, mechanical, and plumbing inspections carried over to the next day because the current group of construction inspectors must perform both fire protection inspections as well as the inspection of these other disciplines. While it is not possible to eliminate all carryover inspections, it is important to note that nearly every carryover inspection results in customer dissatisfaction and increased pressure on the inspectors.

The costs of these upgraded and additional positions will be offset by revenues collected through the Fire Protection Permit process. Currently, the existing fee schedule and subsequent revenues for Fire Protection System permits do not offset the expenditures associated with the process. Therefore, a new fee schedule for Fire Protection Permits is proposed that will increase the permit fee for fire suppression systems (sprinkler, standpipe, and restaurant hood) from \$12 per \$1,000 of the total construction cost to \$35 per \$1,000. The permit fee for fire alarm devices of \$75 minimum plus \$2 per device will increase to \$75 minimum plus \$9 per device. This will result in an increase in the average inspection cost from \$37 to \$109.

This proposal has been presented to some representatives of the development community and has been favorably received. These representatives expressed that more timely plan review and inspections of fire protection systems, under the proposed protocol, resulting in the reduction of inspection carry overs make the fee increase acceptable. The representatives stated that the development community could not afford delays in the scheduling of fire protection system tests as is currently occurring in Fairfax County. The proposed fees will be greater than those of Arlington County but less than Fairfax County.

FISCAL IMPACT: Annual direct incremental operating costs, which include salaries, benefits and vehicle depreciation costs, are \$383,382 (see Attachment 1 for details). These costs will be offset completely by fees (up to \$423,000 is possible) collected through the issuance of fire protection system permits. One time costs to initiate the program, including ancillary equipment such as uniforms and equipment, in the amount of \$59,083, are planned to be purchased in FY 2002 if City Council approves this proposal in the FY 2003 budget.

This proposal was originally planned to be brought to City Council and implemented in mid-FY 2002, but late in the FY 2003 budget process when it was clear that development related planning and zoning fees were also going to be recommended for an increase, a decision was made to hold off on this change in Fire Protection System permit fees until FY 2003 when these Fire fees could be considered by the development community at the same time as the planning and zoning fees. As a result these costs and revenues for this proposal are not included in the FY 2003 proposed budget. However, since this is a cost neutral proposal there is no net fiscal impact to the General Fund of adding this proposal to the FY 2003 budget.

- ATTACHMENTS:
1. FY 2003 Proposed Costs - Detail
 2. Proposed Resolution

STAFF:

- Thomas Hawkins, Fire Chief
- Arthur Dahlberg, Director of Code Enforcement
- Mark Jinks, Assistant City Manager
- Gene Swearingen, Director, OMB
- Alfred Coleman, Budget/Management Analyst, OMB

Attachment 1

FY 2003 PROPOSED COSTS - DETAILS

Fire Prevention Engineer (GS-21G)	\$60,702	\$16,203	\$0	\$76,905
Fire Prevention Plan Reviewer (GS-18G)	\$52,444	\$14,760	\$0	\$67,204
(3) Code Enforcement Inspectors (GS-16G)	\$142,704 (\$47,568 ea)	\$41,724 (\$13,908 ea)	\$5,250 (\$1,750 ea)	\$189,678
Engineer Aide (GS-11G)	\$37,454	\$12,141	\$0	\$49,595
TOTAL	\$293,304	\$84,828	\$5,250	\$383,382

RESOLUTION NO. _____

WHEREAS, section 8-1-29(a) of The Code of the City of Alexandria, Virginia, 1981, as amended, provides that all fees for permits, inspections and certificates required by the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code shall be as established by resolution of the city council; and

WHEREAS, Resolution No. 1935, adopted by city council on September 28, 1999, which incorporated an attached fee schedule, is the most recent establishment of such fees by the council; and

WHEREAS, city council has determined that the fee schedule set forth in Resolution No. 1935 is in need of amendment and adjustment to change the fees charged for permits that authorize the installation or alteration of fire protection systems;

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE
CITY COUNCIL OF ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA:**

1. That the fee schedule attached hereto, entitled "City of Alexandria, Virginia, Code Enforcement Bureau, Fee Schedule," dated December ??, 2001, is deemed to contain fair and appropriate fees to be paid by persons seeking various permits, inspections and certificates, and other services, from the city's Code Enforcement Bureau;

2. That said fee schedule shall be, and hereby is, approved and incorporated by reference in this resolution, and shall, until amended or rescinded, set forth the fees to be charged for various permits, inspections and certificates that are required by the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code and are issued by the city's Code Enforcement Bureau, as well as for other services that are performed by the bureau;

3. That Resolution No. 1935, adopted on September 28, 1999, shall be, and hereby is, rescinded; and

4. That this resolution shall be effective on the date of its adoption, and the attached fee schedule shall, from that date on, be in full force and effect.

ADOPTED: May 6, 2002

KERRY J. DONLEY MAYOR

ATTEST:

Beverly I. Jett, CMC City Clerk