

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 # 2 : ESTABLISHMENT OF A FIRE PROTECTION SYSTEM RETESTING PROGRAM IN THE CODE ENFORCEMENT DIVISION OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT

ISSUE: The establishment of a Fire Protection System Retesting Program in the Code Enforcement Division of the Fire Department.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council review this budget memo and approve the proposed establishment of a Fire Protection Retesting Program in the Code Enforcement Division of the Fire Department as reflected in the FY 2003 proposed budget.

DISCUSSION: Properly inspected, tested and serviced Fire Protection Systems ensure the protection of lives and property to a greater degree than any construction method or material. Although Section F-501.4 of the Virginia Uniform Statewide Fire Prevention Code (SFPC) requires periodic inspection and testing of these systems, many fire protection systems are not maintained properly and are subject to failure in the event of a fire emergency. Data compiled by the National Fire Protection Association shows that the success rate for properly maintained fire sprinkler systems is between 87 and 98 percent depending on occupancy. However, when these systems are not properly maintained, 8 out of 10 unsatisfactory or inadequate performance failures are attributed to the failure to maintain the operational status or failure to assure the adequacy of the fire protection system.

The owners of buildings are responsible for the maintenance of these systems. However, there is no provision in the SFPC requiring any level of certification for the firms or individuals who inspect, test, service or maintain these systems. As a result, unqualified personnel are performing work on existing systems and certifying these systems without the benefit of the local or state governments fire agency oversight.

To ensure all fire protection systems throughout the City are in service, are functioning properly, and are tested, serviced and maintained appropriately, the Code Enforcement Bureau has proposed the implementation of a Retesting Program for all existing fire protection systems

throughout the City. The goal under this program would be to ensure that all installed systems in residential and commercial buildings are tested and maintained so that they are fully operational during a fire emergency. To perform this service, the Bureau will employ four Fire Protection System Specialists (FPSS) to properly inspect and test fire protection systems while ensuring the inspections and tests comply with adopted standards and the City Code. Training of the Fire Protection Specialists will include a minimum of 8 weeks of in-house training including the State level Fire Inspector II certification.

Similar retesting programs in Arlington and Fairfax Counties initially revealed that the failure rate of fire protection systems was consistently 90 percent placing lives and property at risk. This failure rate has been significantly reduced since the establishment of these programs. Routine inspections throughout the City have uncovered serious and numerous system problems from failed underground water supply lines to fire alarm systems out of service. The goal of this new retesting program is to have every fire protection system in the City inspected annually, which will result in a year-to-year reduction in the number of systems that are found to be non-compliant with the City Code.

In addition, a database will be developed to track all fire protection systems in the City. The database will incorporate all necessary information to accurately track the required system information, will contain all building specific information, test results and system functionality, track inspections and test dates for scheduling and will create follow-up reports to track system deficiencies and ensure the system problems are corrected. The database will also link to the City's Permit*Plan (the City's permit tracking system) to automatically collect information concerning new system installations in order to include those systems in the database.

FISCAL IMPACT: This Fire Retesting Program is proposed to be established mid-FY 2003 at a cost of \$165,410 for six-months, including one time costs such as vehicles and equipment. The estimated annualized cost of this program is about \$275,000 per year. Because of start-up costs for the first six-months of this program in FY 2003 only about \$36,000 in revenue is estimated for FY 2003. However, the cost of this program in subsequent years will be offset by revenues collected, based on a projected inspection fee of \$20 per quarter hour per employee. This revenue will start to be realized in late FY 2003 following training of the Fire Protection Specialists and the education of building owners. If the program works as designed, as much as \$466,000 in revenues per year would be collected in FY 2004. However, until the program is fully operational, actual revenues will not be known. It is anticipated that FY 2004 revenues will eventually cover the costs of operating this program.

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