

REPORT TO THE CITY OF CHARLESTON

ON THE TRAGIC FIRE

OF JUNE 18, 2007

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MAYOR, CITY OF CHARLESTON
SEPTEMBER 18, 2007

Three months ago, almost to this very minute, nine brave, dedicated Charleston firefighters lost their lives doing their duty to make this community safe. Since that moment, they and their families have not been far from our thoughts and we have been working non-stop providing assistance to the families and responding to this tragic fire. I am reporting to you tonight on the actions of your City government since June 18. I must begin this brief report by saying thank you, the citizens of this community, for your extraordinary support, concern, prayers and generosity. You are amazing.

Beginning on the night of the fire, we have been and are continuing to work very hard to make sure we completely understand the mysteries of this complex fire and how an apparent exterior trash fire could, in a matter of minutes, destroy two buildings and take the lives of nine

courageous and experienced firefighters. But for the heroic efforts of our firefighters, it would have taken the lives of other firefighters and a store employee. There are six investigations or studies that together will lead to the understanding of this tragic fire and will answer questions like what role did the unpermitted and illegal building addition play in the fire, the significance of the fire roll-down doors that did not work – all questions of what, if anything, could reasonably have been done differently and more. These efforts, using data, evidence, eye witness accounts and advanced computer modeling, will not only make less likely that such a tragedy occurs again, but will be of value to fire departments throughout our country. As these investigations unfold, their results will be made available to you, all questions that can be answered will be and we will understand.

Knowing that these investigations take time, I knew it was important that we immediately begin a thorough review of our Fire Department and therefore created a Post-Incident Assessment and Enhancement Review to evaluate our City's policies and procedures in fire safety. We sought and found the six best fire service experts in our country. For it is important

for the families, our firefighters and you, the citizens, to know that we are analyzing every aspect of firefighting in Charleston.

This Charleston Fire Department, our nation's first with its 125-year history, its 241 firefighters, engineers, captains and chiefs, works hard for every citizen every day. Last year they responded to over 5,600 calls with an average response time of less than three minutes to your home or business, school or personal emergency. In honor of our nine fallen heroes, we know that one of our responses to this tragic fire must be to take the Charleston Class I Fire Department to a new and even higher level. My goal and that of Chief Rusty Thomas, is to be a national leader to make Charleston the place where other fire departments will come to find the best practices and operations to be trained by our leaders to not only find out how a fire department responds in the wake of tragedy, but to watch a fire department in operation whose standards are equal to or exceed national and international best practices.

Our Fire Review Task Force has already made 27 recommendations, 19 of which have been implemented and the remainder will be as soon as possible. Their recommendations are in the areas of emergency incident operations, firefighter health and safety, department organization and structure, staffing of engine and ladder companies, training, community fire risk education, fire apparatus and equipment, uniforms and communications. In addition to the Task Force recommendations, the Charleston Water System has eliminated all impact and tap fees for sprinkler systems to encourage businesses who were not required to have sprinkler systems to install them. State law did not require the Sofa Super Store to have a sprinkler system. Had there been a sprinkler system, the results of this fire would have been different.

We are preparing legislation to go before our General Assembly to allow cities to require sprinkler systems even when the international building code does not. We will be recommending code changes to limit the level of risk in both new construction and existing properties. Also, City Council and I have committed to acquiring, with assistance from County, State and Federal governments, the site of this tragic fire and will work with you, the citizens of

the community, to determine the best way for this site to honor our heroes. Also, we will be working with you and other generous citizens to seek to find other appropriate ways to honor these men and to make sure that the inspiration of their service and heroism will nourish and benefit Charlestonians in the years to come.

We have been and will continue to work very closely with all of the nine families. We have also set up a model counseling program not only for the families, but for all of our firefighters and their families who lost dear comrades. Your generous donations, now totaling over \$3.8 million, along with public benefits, assure that the nine families will be well taken care of.

Tonight I am releasing a written report, which addresses our response to this fire in greater detail. This is now on the City's website and copies are available at City Hall and at our fire departments. As I have previously committed to you, every report will be made public and

available to you. Our work in response to this tragic fire will continue for as long as it takes to answer all the questions and make our dedicated Fire Department an international leader.

But the story of these heroes and our community's response to their heroic acts will be a part of the City's history forever, for a community is defined less by tragedies and disasters, but more by how it responds. Over more than three centuries, we have worked together to overcome fire, flood, war and storm. We will do it again. I accept the responsibility to you and in honor of our fallen firefighters to make sure that the City government's response to this fire is of equal quality so that not only will it be said that these nine men, Mike Benke, Billy Hutchinson, Louis Mulkey, Brad Baity, Mark Kelsey, Michael French, Melvin Champaign, Earl Drayton and Brandon Thompson were always remembered, but this City and this Fire Department, in the way it carries out its duties, will be honoring them, each and every day to come.