

MEMORANDUM

TO: City Council

FROM: Joseph P. Riley, Jr., Mayor

DATE: August 28, 2007

Many of you probably saw the article in Friday's newspaper that made a number of allegations about the city's response to a 2002 memo by the local firefighters union. While we certainly agree with the union that our dedicated firefighters are among the best in the nation, the article suggests that from the time of the union's memo almost 5 years ago until the recent recommendations made by the city's Fire Review Task Force, the city has completely ignored the interests and safety of our firefighters. This certainly is not accurate. I wanted to clearly explain to you how seriously we take our role in giving our fire department the resources and equipment to provide high quality fire protection for the citizens of the City of Charleston.

In the aftermath of the Sofa Superstore fire, Chief Thomas, Chief Mullen and I determined that bringing an outside team in to make an assessment of our Fire Department and recommendations for enhancement would help make our Fire Department even better. As a result, former Shreveport, LA Fire Department Chief Gordon Routley assembled a team which made a series of initial recommendations that Chief Thomas and the Fire Department implemented immediately. Eighteen of the 26 major recommendations made by Chief Routley have been implemented as of today, including all of the safety-related recommendations. Recommended personnel additions to the Fire Department, including six additional firefighter positions that had already been budgeted, will be added as soon as possible. The Public Information Officer position is currently being advertised and we hope to fill that as soon as possible.

It is important to note that the interim report by Chief Routley's team and the additional recommendations that we expect from them in mid-September were diagnostic

reports done by evaluating the Fire Department as if the Sofa Superstore fire had never happened. Their recommendations were not based on any events that happened on June 18. Therefore, it is important that our community not jump to conclusions about the relevance of these recommendations to that fire. Until we have the final reports from the various regulatory and law enforcement agencies that are investigating the fire and the tragic death of our firefighters, it is premature to make assumptions about their cause. Through the many reports that are being compiled we will know as much as it is possible to know about that fire. We are committed to learning all the lessons we can and using those lessons to improve our own Fire Department and in the process to improve the fire service nationwide.

The City of Charleston is extremely proud of our Fire Department and its leadership. You have joined me in endeavoring to provide the resources to give our department the best possible facilities and equipment to make our department better. Over the past 7 years our city has made tremendous investments. From 2000 to the end of this year, we will have added 38 new firefighter positions. In the last 10 years, we have invested in excess of \$5.6 million in fire stations including new stations on Johns Island in 1998, James Island in 2000, Daniel Island in 2004 and Bees Ferry Road in 2007. We have invested approximately \$3.4 million in new engines, pumper and ladder trucks since 1998. Since that time the city will have replaced half of all of the Fire Department's major rolling stock. This represents a sustained investment of about \$310,000 annually, and consequently the Fire Department has excellent engines, pumpers and ladder trucks. In addition, in 2006, at a cost of \$1,000,040, the city acquired digital radios and provides a walkie talkie for every single firefighter on duty. Also, in 2002 City Council provided new personal alert safety system (PASS) devices for all firefighters. The walkie talkies and these devices enhance the safety of every single firefighter.

The 2002 union memo referred to in Friday's newspaper provided "suggestions for improvement" in six areas. The suggestions for improvements related to uniforms, vacation schedule, living quarters, NFPA 1710 compliance, 25 year retirement and pay scale. This letter was written almost 5 years ago, and many changes relating to the welfare and safety of our firefighters, as outlined above, have occurred since that time. The newspaper reporter raised a question about the union members' assertion that the polyester uniforms worn by firefighters are unsafe for interior firefighting. In 2004, the South Carolina Department of Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) investigated this same complaint and found that the uniforms are in full compliance with OSHA's standards.

A question also was raised by the reporter about NFPA 1710 standard related to staffing and incident response. NFPA is a guideline for responding to fires, and the State of South Carolina has not adopted the NFPA guidelines as state law. Nonetheless, we continue to strive to meet or exceed the recommendations of the NFPA. One goal of the NFPA 1710 is to have 15 firefighters on the scene within 8 minutes. This is and has been a goal of the Fire Department for years. In fact, at the Sofa Super Store fire, there were 19 firefighters at that scene within 8 minutes. Our mutual aid agreements with other jurisdictions, which have been in place prior to 2002, also assist in our response.

A third question raised by the reporter and the 2002 letter is the City's failure to follow the "two in, two out" rule. NFPA 1710 recommends that fire departments follow the "two in, two out" federal OSHA regulation when providing the initial response to an interior structural fire. While State of South Carolina law currently permits "two in, one out" when fighting fires in some cases, we recently voluntarily adopted the NFPA guideline on this matter.

It is important to note that we agree with the union that our firefighters are among the best in the nation, that they are dedicated professionals, and that they are efficient and well trained.

With regard to the union's assertions about our pay and benefits, we share with Chief Thomas the desire to keep firefighter pay competitive. Routine pay comparisons often suggest changes that are made as part of our budget process. Such a change was an increase in pay of the fire captains we made last year. The pay review showed our captains (on average) making more than their counterparts, but also showed that with possible increases available in the other municipalities our captains might not maintain that pay edge indefinitely. Therefore, changes were made to keep our captains highly competitive in the "marketplace". This change cost the city nearly \$250,000 per year, but was done because it was the correct thing to do. You may also recall that city recently made the change to put the CFD personnel in the South Carolina Public Safety Retirement System effective July 1, 2005. This change was tremendously beneficial to our firefighters.

When talking about pay, benefits must also be considered. The City of Charleston provides highly competitive benefits. Our health care benefits are great and are getting better every year and we have a commitment to providing wellness programs that are second to none provided by any other municipality in the United States. Our educational tuition reimbursement system is the best in the United States. Chief Thomas recently adjusted the fire department's vacation policy to give our firefighters more flexibility in planning vacations. All of these add up to a pay and benefit package that makes us extremely attractive to those seeking a career in the fire service.

Finally, I want to explain one more piece of information that I think will help you understand our commitment to the CFD family. As a result of the tragic events of June 18, the city is taking part in the Workers' Compensation process associated with our fallen fire fighters. The law allows for maximum 500 weeks compensation for loss of life. The law also provides for a present value calculation be performed for those survivors who elect to be paid in an up-front lump sum. This calculation would reduce the pay-out up-front to approximately 409 weeks of pay. Over six weeks ago, city staff recommended and I approved a plan to waive the present value calculation and pay the full 500 weeks up-front. No lawyer, judge, commissioner, union representative, reporter or anyone else suggested we do this; they did not even know we did it! Doing this increased our costs by more than one third. Why then was it done? The answer to that question is simple – we felt it was the compassionate and right thing to do.

Since I was first elected Mayor, I have sought every year to improve the level of municipal services we offer the citizens of our city. Our city is widely recognized as one of the best places in America to live, work and raise a family. But being the best means always seeking to get better. We are constantly receiving information on all areas of our city government and always seeking to ways to serve Charleston better. Chief Thomas and I welcome your suggestions and input as to how we can make our great fire department better for our citizens and safer for you. Please call me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

JPR,jr/cb