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Elgin saving money by pulling fire engine out of service because firefighters won't give up pay raise, officials say

By GLORIA CASAS

ELGIN COURIER-NEWS | FEB 10, 2021



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The city of Elgin has proposed removing Engine 6 from service at its 707 E. Chicago St. station in an effort to save money in the 2021 budget. (City of Elgin / HANDOUT)

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The Elgin Fire Department plans to take a Station 6 fire engine out of service on some days in order to save money on staffing and overtime, Elgin Fire Chief Robb Cagann said.

What's not happening, Cagann emphasized at Wednesday night's Elgin City Council meeting, is the closure of 707 E. Chicago St. station.

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“There’s a fair amount of confusion of what is transpiring,” he said. “There’s a belief that Station 6 is closing. It is not true.”

When the engine is not in service, it will be replaced by an ambulance crew. The engine requires three people whereas the ambulance only needs two.

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If the plan is implemented, the engine would not be used for 280 days. The ambulance, not the engine, would respond to emergency calls, he said.

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Elgin Association of Firefighters Local 439 is opposed to the plan, which city spokeswoman Molly Gillespie said has been necessitated by the union refusing to forgo its 2.5% raise this year.

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In a statement posted on social media, the union said taking the engine out of commission for that many days will result in a reduction in services for residents. Engine 6 responded to more than 3,000 calls last year, the union post said.

“If you live, work or own a business in Elgin, it is imperative that you contact the Council Members ... to state your opposition to this reduction in service,” the post said.

Cagann told the council that the union post was a little misleading. Engine 6 did handled 3,000 last year but citywide, not just within the Station 6 district.

Of those calls, more than 2,100 involved a need for Emergency Medical Services, he said.

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With the adjustment, “we’re adding an enhancement to our EMS capabilities within the city,” he said.

While Engine 6 is one of the busiest vehicles for the department, but Station 6 is not the busiest station, he said. Stations 1 and 4 have more calls, Cagann said.

“Those are distinct differences that have not been explained well in public,” he said.

When asked by Councilman Corey Dixon about response times, the chief acknowledged the change could create some delays.

The National Fire Protection Agency recommends a fire engine respond to a scene within four minutes of firefighters leaving a station, he said. While a vast majority of calls in District 6 will meet that time, calls to other parts of the city could take a little longer. he said.

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“It’s important for the community to understand there will still be highly trained firefighters at your emergency in a timely fashion,” Cagann said, but qualified later that “there is no way for me to be able to quantify what this impact is going to be today.

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“I would not say our plan renders the loss of a fire engine to be insignificant in any stretch, but I believe the plan our staff has come up with certainly minimizes the impact to the community,” he said.

Dixon said he wasn’t sure he could support the idea.

“These proposed changes make me uncomfortable in the fact we don’t know which zones will receive that increase in the time it will take to get there,” he said.

He also cited concern that many of the city’s low-income households and properties are located on the east side of the Station 6 district. “The optics of this just makes me uncomfortable,” Dixon said.

Union President Joe Galli, speaking prior to the meeting, said what concerns them is the proposal would reduce the daily staffing number from 31, the minimum number for current fire station operations, to 30,

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“On some days, it could be really bad. On some days, it may not be noticed,” Galli said. “The problem is our calls are not by appointment. We can’t predict when emergencies are going to happen. It just remains to be seen how bad it will be.”

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the department budget, one they can achieve if firefighters are unwilling to give up

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Nonunion staff won't be getting cost-of-living raises this year, Gillespie said in a statement, and last year there were layoffs in the Parks and Recreation Department and 5% to 10% salary cuts for city management. That helped resolve a \$2.8 million shortfall in the 2020 budget, she said.

Nonunion staff not receiving raises will save Elgin taxpayers about \$1.6 million in 2021 and \$4.6 million over the course of the next three years, Gillespie said.

Employees in collective bargaining units were exempted from the wage reductions in 2020 with the understanding that they would be asked to go without their raises in 2021, she said.

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Galli said the city's statement contains some true "and some false statements." "We didn't insist on taking our raises," he said. "We insisted on getting a promise they are not going to cut staff.

"To say we are refusing is disingenuous," Galli said. "The city is holding the football, asking us to kick it. We aren't going to do it."

In 2011, the union approved a concession and less than a year later, the city cut positions that have never been restored, he said. Firefighters are willing to renegotiate the final year of their union contract, which expires in December, he said, but the city isn't willing to do that.

The union decided to inform residents about city officials' plans because "it's the taxpayers' fire department," Galli said.

Raising taxes to increase revenue is not an option right now, Gillespie said. "Seeking additional revenue from its residents and businesses during an economic downturn should only be an option of last resort," she said.

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