

Uncertain Budgets

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The process of preparing a fiscal budget is not on the minds of most firefighters. Their expectation is that pot of money is always there and that the chief will find the funds to maintain and grow operations. However, that is becoming more of a challenge for all jurisdictions.

Mergers are occurring, and new authorities are being put into place. In Colorado, for example, several departments have merged into larger departments, which can have a negative effect on the firefighters who may lose their jobs or must start over getting to know new people, protocols, and policies.

No matter the size, all fire departments must find the funds to operate. This can come from sales tax,

property tax, special district funding, and a variety of other sources—depending on the jurisdiction.

Not totally unlike the corporate world of profit/loss statements, advertising, and stockholders, fire departments must deal with their own uncertainties. Catastrophic events can decimate a department's budget. Wildfires, hurricanes, and civil unrest are just a few of the unpredictable events that can dent or crush a budget.

One good example of this occurred during the 2012 presidential election. Our area had three visits from one candidate that had not been predicted. The United States Secret Service was fantastic to work with, but there was no reimbursement for fire and police out-of-pocket expenses. It was a substantial amount of money, and, to put it mildly, put a crimp in our pocketbook.

In addition, forecasting and planning are needed for funding apparatus replacement, new equipment, outdated PPE including bunker gear, helmets, boots, gloves, hoods, SCBA, and other equipment.

When budgets fall short, the options are never good. Closing stations, brown outs, layoffs, and short staffing are options that increase the risk to firefighters. And, citizens will suffer the consequences. The list is long and safety is the bottom line for those who are willing to risk a lot. The above is only a partial list. Wages, benefits, pension contributions, station improvements, communication, dispatch (911), public education, software, prevention, fleet service, and ongoing equipment maintenance are just a few of the many areas affected by budget constraints or shortfalls.

Routine hose, ladder, and pump testing must also be completed on a regular basis to ensure the safety of the public, firefighters, and properties impacted during calls. The job of keeping a fire department operating is no easy task. However, the fire service can learn some valuable practices from the private sector.

Budgeting is a planning process that requires high levels of expertise of those in charge. The chief or designated representative must know how budgets and fire operations coexist.

A logistics position within the command structure is a good start. This person does not have to be a firefighter but rather someone who knows the system under which the fire department operates. The main components of any budget are the capital expenditures and the operational budget.

Capital budgeting requires forecasting and planning. Optimally, it should project out 18 months to cover a variety of needs and contingencies that may arise. Increasingly, this type of planning needs to incorporate both proactive measures to address terrorism prevention and the like, and to be able to effectively react when a manmade or natural disaster—such as a hurricane—occurs.

Both are on the upswing, and more than ever, police, fire, and other public safety authorities are being called upon to cooperate to prevent and respond as needed. All of this takes planning—and money.

Operational budgets deal more with day-to-day costs, like payroll, benefits, fuel costs, station

maintenance, and other overhead. These budgets, too, are subject to increased scrutiny as the world becomes an ever-more dangerous place with unpredictable occurrences that can strain all fire-related resources and assets.

Replacement funds are one way of setting money aside to purchase large ticket items. This takes precise calculation and good data tracking. Fire trucks, PPE, SCBA, and other items have expiration dates that can be easily tracked.

So, what happens when a fire department overruns its budget? When shortfalls exist, a complete audit of all operations must be completed. Prioritizing the needs and determining what can and cannot be cut are tough decisions. Whatever the outcome, fire departments must begin using technology to better organize and plan. Just as the new-era fire pumpers have advanced, fire departments must look at new tools to better predict and prepare their budgets.

One place to start streamlining and improving this process is to implement cloud-based technologies. Getting rid of paper systems will save time and money. The research is very clear on this. Paper systems are very expensive and are not user-friendly. Embracing new systems is not new. CAD, MTDs, cell phones, tablets, and other devices can and will improve planning and decision making. The old saying, "knowledge is power," should be part of the fire service. The days of paper checks, paper logs, paper staffing, and all the other paper-driven chores should be over.

The money spent on these new systems is more of an investment than an expense. And yes, some will not like the innovative technologies but the time has come. Budgets are tight and mergers will continue, but chiefs must look at the options that can improve efficiency and cut the waste.

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