

Petition
10-7-02

To: The Chapel Hill Town Council
From: Ralph Abrahams
Topic: The Need for Additional Fire Department Resources

The town of Chapel Hill has a serious problem that affects all residents and therefore all of us. That problem is the inadequate number of trained fire fighters available to protect our lives and our residential and commercial buildings. I am not sure that the citizens of Chapel Hill and perhaps even the town council are aware of the magnitude of the problem.

I have requested data from the town as to the number of fire fighters that have been added to the department since 1990 as compared to the increase in population, dwellings, and commercial buildings. I am confident that that information is forthcoming, however, I feel that it is urgent for the town council address the situation without further delay.

Having spoken to the fire department it is my understanding that unlike the police department, which follows the law by increasing the number of officers in relationship to the increase in population; the fire department is not required by law to increase its staff according to the increase in population.

Furthermore, it appears that the Chapel Hill fire department has added only 15 fire fighters since 1988. The Chapel Hill Fire Department is said to have the best equipment in the area, however, the fire department currently allows for two fire fighters per fire truck, which is considered inadequate. Two fire fighters are not allowed by law to do very much. Two fire fighters are not even allowed to enter the building until additional support has arrived. It has been called to my attention that having four fire fighters per truck would not only provide for the correct use of our equipment and improve our fire fighting capacity, but would also make it safer for our fire fighters, brave men and women who risk their lives on our behalf. Firefighters that by the way, earn significantly less money than the average resident of Chapel Hill, and whom often have to work a second job to support their families.

The problem is one of both quantity and quality. The quantity of fire fighters needs to be increased and the quality of training needs to be improved.

I am sure that it is of no surprise that the resolution to the problem begins with money. Money to be allocated to these important issues in the Town budget and if necessary budget cuts in other, less important areas or new fees and taxes to ensure that our town and its residents, that means us, are well protected from the unpredictable and devastating affect of residential and commercial fire. Imagine how you would feel if your home and all your personal possessions where destroyed and you had to start over. Imagine if you lost a family member because of a house fire. What price do we put on those types of losses? How can we justify spending money on beautification projects when the basic needs of protecting our town from fire have not been met? Money spent for fire protection is money well spent. The cost of replacing expensive buildings and increased fire insurance, not to mention the cost of medical care for those residents and the fire fighters who with better training might not have been injured in the line of duty is far greater then burden of cost passed on to building permits or residential taxes.

I urge the town council members who are responsible for preparing the town budget to prioritize carefully. To protect us all by making sure that our fire protection does not take second fiddle to other popular town and neighborhood issues which in the large scale of things can't compare to the importance of fire protection.

The town council needs to work with the fire department to determine the best ways for improving the situation.

I stand here as one citizen asking the town council to respond. It seems that sometimes it takes a large group of concerned citizens voicing their feelings before any real decisions are made or any real action is taken. I am sure that we could fill town hall, however, I ask that you take action now before more property and lives are lost.