

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Report: Tough Decisions, Or An \$82M Hole

BY **Thomas MacMillan** | SEP 2, 2010 1:10 PM
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FRAC's Martin O'Connor and Christine Bishop.

One vision of 2015: New Haven government is \$82 million in the red. A second vision: New Haven has millions to spare, thanks to a modernized fire department, less police overtime, and increased fees for baseball in the park.

Those visions of New Haven's five-year fiscal future were laid out in a third floor conference room in the Hall of Records on Wednesday night. The city's Financial Review and Audit Commission (FRAC), a budget advisory body of mayoral appointees, heard a draft of a report by a consulting agency assigned to analyze the city's financial trajectory for the next five years.



Ken Murray (pictured) of Management Partners consulting firm led the commissioners through a detailed overview of the 70-page five-year financial plan his company has been working on for months. The document was crafted from seven years of financial data from



THOMAS MACMILLAN PHOTO

New Haven, as well as comparative data from several towns in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Read the

draft [here](#).

After all the bean counting and number crunching, Management Partners has determined that, without major changes in how government is run, the city will find itself in a \$82.7 million hole in 2015.

There is hope, however, in the form of numerous suggestions and recommendations to both trim expenditures and increase revenues.

The report projects that those changes would avoid the \$82 million hole, and put the city on track to have at least 5 percent, or \$27 million, of its 2015 budget as “unappropriated funds”—aka “rainy day funds”—not allocated to any department. That would position the city to have a healthy bond rating, allowing it to borrow money more cheaply.

The predictions are based on a number of assumptions, including the notion that New Haven will raise \$8 million this year through vaguely promised “[Innovation Based Budgeting \(IBB\)](#).” The report is also based on confident predictions of steady Payment In Lieu Of Taxes from the state, an assumption that drew questions from commissioners Wednesday night.

One commissioner, budget watchdog Jeffrey Kerekes, noted that a huge city expense in years to come was not within the scope of the report: pensions for city employees.



After FRAC peppered consultant Murray (pictured) with questions, the commission made plans to meet again to discuss the report on Sept. 21. After that, it plans to hold a public hearing to present findings to the Board of Aldermen’s Finance Committee. The document presented then will include Management Partners’ final report and FRAC’s analysis and recommendations of how to proceed based on its findings.

That’s all part of FRAC’s mandate as an advisory body. The commission was formed during charter revision in the ‘90s, when the city’s Board of Finance was dissolved, said city Controller Mark Pietrosimone, in whose offices FRAC meets

FRAC’s role is to review the city budget and make recommendations to the Board of Aldermen and to do an independent audit of the city’s books every four years, he said. In Fiscal Year 09-10, money was set aside for

FRAC to do a five-year financial plan, to perform a role similar to the Blue Ribbon Budget Panel of that year, Pietrosimone said.

That's how Murray, the consultant, came to be presenting his report to FRAC Wednesday night. After he and the commissioners helped themselves to Abate's pizza and Foxon Park Kola, Murray began his presentation—on a positive note.

"The bottom line is you guys have really done a pretty good job financially," Murray said. The starting point is not bad, assuming the city meets its 2011 budget goals, he said. However, tough decisions have to be made in order to reach the 5 percent unappropriated funds balance by 2015. "That's the magic number when it comes to any type of bond review," Murray said. It would mean the city has the financial means to support borrowing. The city now has a 3.4 unappropriated funds balance, Murray said.

After some discussion of methodology in creating the report, Murray made his prognosis. If things continue as they have, without changes, the city will have a budget deficit of \$82 million by 2015, he said.

"I have seen worse, believe me," he said. "I have seen better, but I've also seen worse."

Does that prediction include IBB and monetization? asked budget activist Kerekes. He was referring in part to a plan revived by City Hall to have the city [collect a quick \\$50 million in cash in return for handing \\$120 million](#) worth of parking revenues over 25 years to an Ohio company.

IBB predicts \$8 million in revenues and \$5 million in savings this year, Murray said. The \$8 million in revenues is indicated on the report as "Monetization/IBB" for the next five years. It's a placeholder representing the savings IBB promises this year that will be carried over to succeeding years. "It's not to us to say it's going to happen or not," Murray said. The city says it will happen, so it's in the report.

Police, Fire Alarm

Murray pointed out several areas where New Haven's spending is higher than that of comparable cities. Education spending, particularly as a result of new school construction, is one area of interest, he said. New Haven has fewer students than Hartford or Bridgeport, but more staff and more schools than either, according to the report. New Haven has 1,000 fewer students than Bridgeport, but has 10 more schools.

"This is a tough nut for you. It's a very tough nut," Murray said. At the beginning of New Haven's school construction boom, "did the city every sit down and say how many schools do we need and where do you need them?" Murray suggested hiring an educational consulting firm to look at those questions. Increased number of schools related to an increase in administrative staff, he said.

In terms of general government, Murray pronounced the parks and public works department "amazing" for what they are able to get done with the budgets they have. "They are performing well above industry standards."

As for problem departments, "it came back largely to your fire and police," Murray said. The police department should look at where it's deploying its officers. Crime is not happening equally all over the city, Murray said. The department also needs to manage overtime better. "Does the department have an effective process for managing overtime when it is discretionary?" Murray said. "You need to be much more judicious about who you call out, when you call them out, and how you use them."

One part of the solution could be to hire more cops. The police department is paying so much in overtime that it would be cheaper to simply hire more officers, Murray said.

The fire department also has a significant problem with overtime, Murray said. "You've got a department that has some real significant staffing and response issues."

The department is larger than necessary, resulting in excessive overtime, since more firefighters respond to calls than are necessary, Murray said.

The department has not changed with the times, Murray said. Fire departments are more and more called on for emergency medical services (EMS) and less and less for fires. New Haven's department "is really stuck in an older response mode."

The fire department could do more to recover expenses from EMS calls, Murray said. "You want to be more aggressive in billing and collecting" from insurance companies, he said.

Unneeded fire department equipment could also be sold to bring in revenue, Murray said. Other city vehicles could also be sold, he said. "There's a surprising market for municipal vehicles."

Other potential revenue streams Murray mentioned include increased rental housing and commercial building inspection fees, recovery of Medicaid and Medicare funds for health services provided in public schools, and charging the Housing Authority of New Haven \$750,000 in Payments In Lieu Of Taxes.

Murray also spoke about raising parks and recreation fees. Other cities recover 25 percent to 40 percent of parks department budgets with fees. New Haven's rate is less than 5 percent, Murray said.



Raising fees to the industry standard in one year seems unrealistic, said Commissioner Christine Bishop (pictured).

"It's substantial," Murray said. "It's been done pretty regularly."

Don't people just stop going to the park? Bishop asked.

"They might," Murray said. The question is whether they have alternatives for swimming and playing ball. "I've seen cities double their fees year in and year out."

"Teams come from out of town to play on our fields, because they're cheaper," said commission Chair Martin O'Connor.

After the meeting wrapped up, Commissioner Bishop said that while there is "still a lot to digest," all the report's recommendations look worthy of consideration by the city.





"This is a conversation that the city needs to be having now," said Chair O'Connor (pictured).

Before the meeting, Kerekes, noted that the report does not consider the city's pension gap. The report indicates on page 27 that the city has a disproportionately high number of full time equivalent employees, compared with other city's of it's size. But the city has not been putting aside enough money for the retirement of those employees, Kerekes said. It's a big issue that was beyond the scope of the report, he said. "That's the thing that's going to bankrupt the city."

After the meeting, Kerekes said avoiding the \$82 million hole and coming up with 5 percent unallocated funds by 2015 is a huge task. It amounts to saving about \$100 million over the next five years, he said. "It's no small task."

Success will depend on political will, which the administration might not possess, Kerekes said. Changes to the fire department, for example, are bound to meet with significant resistance, he said.

Kerekes said all the report's recommendations made sense. He said he saw the report partly as a third-party corroboration of some of the calculations that his New Haven Citizens Action Network budget activist group has done, like the high cost of firefighters and the school board.

Comments

posted by: Darnell on September 2, 2010 2:18pm

Wow, this report/study seems to back up all of the arguments we made during the budget debate: a local government overly large staffing compared to cities the same size; excessive police and fire overtime; a school administration that should be reduced; a runaway and out of controlled budget that will bankrupt all taxpayers.

When we made th argument for cuts, we were told that there wasn't room to cut; police and fire overtime was sacred and unavoidable; school administration was bare bones.

Can't wait to see the administrations response.

posted by: anon on September 2, 2010 2:56pm

Excellent reporting.

Also what is left out is the fact that most of our city salaries and benefits are sent out of the city, into the hands of suburban workers. About 90% of our cops, for example, live outside of New Haven.

Provide major incentives for city staff to live in New Haven, like what Yale has done, and New Haven will see the benefits (including higher property and commercial taxes). Cut all salaries and benefits across the board by 20%, then put back a 30% benefit (e.g., homebuyer grants, free bus passes, free tuition for college) for those employees who choose to live within city limits.

Already, our public sector employees make far more than the average private sector employee, and this could be one way to correct the balance. It's unfair that we all have to share the burden of taxes, just to see those funds get sucked out of our city and into North Haven and Orange.

posted by: Ben on September 2, 2010 2:59pm

@Darnell

How do you reconcile your living wage ordinance position with your belief in the need to cut city spending?

posted by: Cedarhillresident on September 2, 2010 3:00pm

Darnell

When I read it.....It was a bit vindicating! NHCAN said the FD average was 116,000 and city hall said we where wrong and we inflated it....well these guys said we are wrong to but...it is 150,000 :0 we were being to fair :) Not sure how do the funding of the Pilots play into all of this...we know there is no way...no matter who is in office the citys will see the full amount or even what we got this year...is that included in this??

And as Jeffery stated is also is not including the pensions...that a big one.

Well ya see darnell many of the people in that room will be gone when the shit hits the fan...what do they care!!!!!! Many are fighting for the right thing...but have the hype and other factors working against them.

Most we can do is keep fighting and how the people will listen...but that may not happen till it hits home hard enough. By By working class.

I am proud of the Park and PW they came out really good.

posted by: Darnell on September 2, 2010 3:27pm

Ben, good question, and I am glad you asked. The proposal now before the BOA is NOT the proposal I signed onto several months ago. The initial proposal and the initial fiscal analysis from the city called for a modest increase in the Living Wage rate, costing less than \$100,000. I told my co-sponsors that I would be willing to support the proposal as long as it did not add to the budget, the additional costs would have to be found by shifting costs within the current budget.

What is now being discussed bears no resemblance to that original proposal, I am not in favor of this new proposal. I am trying to give Mike Jones and the administration time to work out their differences. Just today I also asked the administration what they could live with, I thought going back to the original proposal could be a starting point. I have not received an answer from them.

Rest assured that I have not changed my stripes, I still believe in reduced government resulting in reduced burdens on taxpayers (including me). Contrary to what some would like to believe, I have not made any proposals before the BOA that would result in a budget increase. All of my proposals have called for corresponding cuts, if not greater. In other words, I propose paying for my initiatives by making cuts in others places, setting priorities.

I hope that explains my position for you.

posted by: X Double Dipper on September 2, 2010 3:29pm

FRAC has no clout and never has. The chair is a former Fire Chief...think you'll get any criticism from him about Fire? ...

And what about the debt service that's due every fiscal year on all the new schools hizzoner had to build? Your talking 50 to 60 million right there.

Perhaps staff in the Mayor's Office should become city tax payers.

posted by: Cedarhillresident on September 2, 2010 3:29pm

anon
great point....

COMMUTER TAX!!!!

posted by: ignoranceisbliss on September 2, 2010 3:34pm

Does Mr. Kerekes have any thoughts on how the proposed living wage ordinance fits in with all of this?

posted by: James on September 2, 2010 3:50pm

"\$82 million in the red... [or] millions to spare."

I think we all know precisely which route our esteemed mayor will take on this one. If he didn't see the folly in massively overbuilding schools (without reforming our miserable educations system) or a bloated fire department on his own steam, what in the world makes anybody think that seeing it in a report will make the slightest difference? He'll continue to act out his (failed) social experiments on our dime and we'll keep reelecting him. I simply pray that I have been able to get out of here before I can see my suspicions play out.

posted by: Doyens on September 2, 2010 3:51pm

This is a very important third party, independent review. It's also an indictment of the mayor, the NH BOE and its administrative staff. NHCAN and individuals associated with it have pointed out most of these findings across the last several years. That our findings have now been ratified, perhaps the mayor will sit up and pay attention instead of blowing smoke up everybody's hiney.

Findings that are stunning:

1. New Haven has fewer students and 10 more schools which translates into a huge administrative and debt burden cost.
2. Mayor DeStefano and Super Mayo/Clark embarked on a \$1.5 billion school construction program with NO MASTER PLAN. No analysis of how many schools we really need. This explains why so many of our schools have low census figures and we have to advertise on television to get suburban kids to come to our schools - advertising that trumpets FREE everything. How could embark on a construction project this large with no blueprint? Ironical that it becomes public on the same day the mayor/mayo are celebrating another \$45 million new school - the fourth on the Hill. Blindingly irresponsible.
3. School debt is a major driver that has doubled our debt service in just six years to more than \$65 million a year.
4. The mayor screamed during the budget sell a thon - screamed that we don't care about Newhallville because he was told there needed to be cuts to fire/police, that there could be no sacred cows. This report says we are overstaffed on both and that we don't deploy our people efficiently or effectively.
5. This report doesn't address our pension problems and it was heavily influenced by city employees outside of the FRAC.
6. This report is made possible because FRAC pushed for it. If they hadn't we'd be right, but the mayor could keep dancing on the head of a pin and blowing smoke.

The question now: Will this collect dust or be used to re-position our future?

posted by: Jonathan Hopkins on September 2, 2010 4:07pm

I agree with Darnell that the police force is far too large and consumes way too much money. We rely far too heavily on the police force for crime prevention and control. The physical planning of our neighborhoods could contribute much more to safety and the perception of safety if we rewrote our zoning laws to provide better casual surveillance throughout the day. For instance, integrating businesses into neighborhoods as of right (as opposed to through variances) would greatly contribute to having more people active and observant in neighborhoods at hours when most people are out of their houses at work; this would also put more easily accessible jobs into neighborhoods. Narrower building lots also help to put more windows from different houses onto the street for people to see out.

One way to make the fire department more efficient would be to provide alternative transportation options and more walkable neighborhoods as a way of discouraging excessive driving and reduce the number of cars on the street which would allow ambulances, fire trucks, and police cars to respond quicker.

However, I think it is a mistake to think of taxes as being simply "too high", it has to be in relation to something. I think it is completely justifiable to have higher taxes, if in return this city took a serious approach to addressing problems and seriously implemented the changes that will create a better city for future generations. It's no wonder the taxes are so high in comparison to what is received in return-we spend so much money on completely idiotic and ineffectual programs and specialized development that does little to generate wealth for the public and retain it locally to uplift the city as a whole.

Anon's idea is interesting and an investigation into its possible implementation would be exciting. I don't know about 20% across the board, but something to this effect would certainly encourage more police officers to live in the actual communities they work in, which would create the possibility of more rehabs on abandoned buildings, more new construction on vacant lots and other measures that would make neighborhoods, block by block, safer.

posted by: Bishop on September 2, 2010 4:27pm

Chair O'Connor, was not a pro active Chief when he was in charge. Nor has his predecessors. The department should of been cut back years ago. No need for the current numbers. The city needs a more pro active department.

Good luck.

posted by: JAK on September 2, 2010 4:33pm

CHR, If you mean a true commuter tax, i.e. taxing ALL commuters whether they work for the city or not, that would be a very bad idea. Lots of workers can now work from anywhere including from home. All that would do would be to encourage telecommuting and it would cut down on daily business for restaurants and retail

downtown.

If you meant taxing out-of-towner city employees, that's a bit better but probably not legal because you can't target tax such a narrow class.

Honestly, in this bloated-budget city, we shouldn't even begin to talk about raising more tax revenue until we cut 15% of our costs. Lets use this consultant's report to set efficiency benchmarks - and start from there. Its time that the majority of New Haven taxpayers who aren't city employees, stop allowing themselves to be ripped off by the police, fire, and teachers unions.

posted by: Ben on September 2, 2010 4:34pm

@ Darnell,

Thank you for your response. I certainly hope that something will be worked out so that this living wage ordinance fails. While I do not fall in the NHCAN camp, I also do not fall in the tax and spend without consequences camp.

Thank you for not supporting this ill-conceived living wage measure and recognizing the hypocrisy inherent in calling for a reduced budget while proposing regulation causing budgetary increases.

posted by: anon on September 2, 2010 5:08pm

Good point, Jonathan.

The fact is, # of vacant buildings per block has a much larger impact on crime than the # of police officers. Apparently, our government only cares about # of staff positions and not the safety of our communities.

Cut staff or salaries, and use that savings to provide incentives for employees to actually live in this city, instead of the current situation where virtually all live outside it.

Why do we keep exporting our hard earned tax dollars to the suburbs?

posted by: robn on September 2, 2010 5:50pm

DARNELL,

Do you have any research to back up your assertion that the city has too many employees per citizen? I've searched for stats on comparable cities and had no luck.

posted by: concernedcitizen on September 2, 2010 6:01pm

I am deeply concerned about the Fire Dept and how its assets and workforce are allocated. 70% of their calls are EMS related yet day in and day out we see 800k apparatus respond to medical calls instead of a rescue ambulance that cost 65K. We have several firehouses that maybe go on 100 call for an entire year and several that do in excess of 3 to 4 thousand. In my opinion at least one firehouse should close and we should reallocate personnel. Lets dig and look at the number of responses per firehouse and take cost effective measures to address the problem. Can the current Chief do this. By the way, I've been told the biggest sick-time abusers live in the city...not the guys that come from the burbs!

posted by: Darnell on September 2, 2010 7:54pm

Robn: The article above highlighted several areas where staff is excessive, including the quotes below:

:Murray pointed out several areas where New Haven's spending is higher than that of comparable cities. Education spending... New Haven has fewer students than Hartford or Bridgeport, but more staff and more schools than either, according to the report. New Haven has 1,000 fewer students than Bridgeport, but has 10 more schools....The fire department also has a significant problem with overtime...The department is larger than necessary, resulting in excessive overtime, since more firefighters respond to calls than are necessary, Murray said."

I do remember seeing additional information regarding excessive staffing during the budget process, I'll try to get my hands on the info for you. Also, CCM should have this info.

posted by: Darnell on September 2, 2010 8:07pm

@Ben:

Thank you for thanking me for not being a hypocrite. LOL.

posted by: Edward Francis on September 2, 2010 10:18pm

Concerned Citizen states "We have several firehouses that maybe go on 100 call for an entire year and several that do in excess of 3 to 4 thousand. In my opinion at least one firehouse should close and we should reallocate personnel."

There are ten fire stations in New Haven. None of them close to one another. They seem to be spaced out to respond in an efficient manner to any fire, emergency, medical or call of good will. Eliminate one fire station and you can rest assure that community will be up in arms. Over the years several fire stations have been closed in New Haven. Fire companies have been eliminated. Some stations have consolidated. Response time is vital. One less fire house will result in a longer response time for that community - the difference between life and death. Maybe concerned citizen might like to eliminate the station in his/her neighborhood!

posted by: Margaret on September 2, 2010 10:45pm

"The department is larger than necessary, resulting in excessive overtime, since more firefighters respond to calls than are necessary, Murray said."

Wait, wait, wait, we have too many of them, so more of them hop on the truck and we pay them overtime for this? Who is in charge here?

posted by: watcher1 on September 2, 2010 11:42pm

i believe the 'truck rolls' for fire apparatus are counted, and when the the cont exceeds a target, new apparatus is purchased. it is an incentive to get new fire trucks—that's why you see so many vehicles responding to petty or minor calls. it self-preservation for jobs also. they old way was the best way, a two-man panel-truck responding to emergencies, not huge, multiple fire-trucks.

as far as schools, new haven wasted more money 'because we could'...just because the state reimbursed 40-60% of construction costs, destefano went nuts. and the joke of the matter is the city seemingly refuses to maintain the buildings once built/rehabbed. just look at conte-west hills—it's a dump. and barnard science magnet? that bridge over the boulevard has NEVER been used. rumor is the bridge is condemned, barring it's use.

if it wasn't so sad it's be funny.

posted by: streever on September 3, 2010 7:18am

...

....

.....

Sorry, I was being incredulous there.

Volunteers plan out the financial future of the city? That's how we do it here?

City employees aren't doing this work?

I mean, hey, that's actually pretty good. Most cities have to pay for this type of work. Honestly, I trust Kerekes and Bishop more than I do the brain trust that came up with having more schools than any other city in the state.

"Education spending, particularly as a result of new school construction, is one area of interest, he said. New Haven has fewer students than Hartford or Bridgeport, but more staff and more schools than either, according to the report. New Haven has 1,000 fewer students than Bridgeport, but has 10 more schools."

That is insane. The fever-pitch acid dream to build schools like they are going out of style is going to have a very long term effect on us.

The fact that we STILL don't have enough police is also a problem, and it makes it clear that this administration is simply not able to effectively manage the city. This has been a known problem for a decade.

posted by: Todd on September 3, 2010 8:12am

The thought of tinkering with the Fire Service scares the hell out of me. I've had encounters with these guys and gals and they provide a top notch service. What they provide to our great city often goes unnoticed and taken for granted.

posted by: Jonathan on September 3, 2010 8:36am

... Yes, the FD is over staffed and not monitored by City Hall. Overtime is so out of wack - recent retirees have pensions above \$100K a year. How does this occur? FD pension should be based on their base salary not all

those dollars they give themselves. Why doesn't the Chief look at his overtime account? Better yet why doesn't City Hall look at the FD closer and longer? FD pensions will eventually take its toll on taxpayers so its time to restructure that department from the top down. Just look at similar department in the US - fires are down and medical calls are up so why are so many men needed. Right, close companies and shut down stations.

posted by: Billy on September 3, 2010 9:30am

Jonathon. The FD actually only works straight time having given up time and a half during their last contract. Go ask some of the people these guys have saved if they want to close stations and see what kind of support you get. ...

posted by: Margaret on September 3, 2010 11:00am

Hey Billy,

A call for the city to look realistically at whether the city's budget for the FD is spent efficiently and effectively is not suggesting that we undervalue the brave and selfless service of firefighters. My guess is that the people who have been saved by firefighters would have been just as grateful to be saved by firefighters working for an organization that provided excellent service without wasteful spending.

posted by: Billy on September 3, 2010 12:59pm

Margaret closing stations will compromise excellent service. I can understand the need for more ems related apparatus and even the shuffling or better organization of resources. However shuttering a firehouse is always a dangerous proposition in my eyes. What the number crunchers don't realize is there is already numerous times a month when whole sections of this city are not covered for a fire emergency because fire apparatus are out doing medical related calls. We've just been fortunate a fire hasn't struck when these engines have been across town. When you rely solely on statistics when it comes to life safety you start treading on a slippery slope. Besides what neighborhood is going to be willing to give up the firehouse that protect them? You won't get my vote to shut down E grand ave who protects my house on Lexington ave. Not to mention thousands of seniors at Bella Vista. I understand the frustration of my fellow taxpayers but i don't like to budge when it comes to police and fire.

posted by: Tim Holahan on September 3, 2010 1:33pm

Thanks to Jeffrey Kerekes, Christine Bishop, and everyone on the FRAC for their work in making this happen. It's a significant step forward for the city.

Having an objective assessment of our near-term financial future is important. As was pointed out in the article, the city's considerable pension and healthcare obligations are ignored, and optimistic assumptions are made about state education and PILOT funding. Those assumptions seem unwarranted given Connecticut's poor fiscal situation.

Even ignoring those problems, the report still sounds a warning: we are headed for the rocks, and if we don't change course, we will be on them within five years.

The person in the best position to push the city to alter course is Mayor DeStefano. He has worked hard for New Haven throughout his entire career. It seems unlikely that another mayor will ever serve for as long. He has nothing to prove, but he does have his legacy to think about. If he chooses to stay the course and leaves the city in dire financial straits, when he has the political power and freedom to make real change, history's verdict may not be kind.

Here's hoping he'll decide to go to work once more for New Haven.

posted by: robn on September 3, 2010 2:15pm

DARNELL,

WikiP has a list of most populous cities in US and there are 168 cities between 100,000 and 200,000 residents. It would be interesting if this could be loaded into a spreadsheet with columns for municipal employees (of course), geographic size and location, grand list, per capita income, cost of living, and other categories which might help tighten the list to an apples to apples comparison.

You guys have a staff...How hard would it be to do a mailer to each municipality (cc'd to an intrepid local journalist to keep the municipalities honest) and see if they respond with data? Maybe Quinnipiac U would be interested in helping sort the data since they know all about polls and sampling.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_cities_by_population

posted by: Margaret on September 3, 2010 3:42pm

Hey Billy,

I don't suggest that shutting stations is the only option- it sounds like sending out smaller vehicles with fewer people on them would be a start.

As for your comment that "When you rely solely on statistics when it comes to life safety you start treading on a slippery slope." When it comes to spending the city's limited resources, we are wise to use whatever reliable data we can come up with so that we can be sure that we are protecting as many lives as possible by being efficient and strategic with our spending.

posted by: Moreorless on September 10, 2010 10:05pm

...His numbers for New Haven, Hartford, and Bridgeport are completely wrong (Bridgeport Fire Dept. did more than 3,741 calls in 2009, and the NHFD did over 23,000). The NHFD staffing is in line with every city of similar size; in fact, the NHFD does more calls than any other fire department in the state of CT by over 4,000 calls a year, and was ranked in the top 100 busiest fire departments in the country. I don't understand how you can say the NHFD is overstaffed when many similar size cities have more manpower and more fire apparatus.

This man wants to cut your services at a time when the NHFD is just beginning to come in line with national safety and trend setting fire departments like Phoenix, AZ. The trend—because I am sure you don't follow trade magazines—is to have fire engines respond as paramedic units/ first responders to aide patients prior to ambulance arrivals. This is the way the NHFD is trying to go—to cut companies and manpower will only hinder the ability of workers to have the critical 4 minute response time to give lifesaving aide to patients—but what do you care—you don't live here.

Sorry Mr. Murray, ...—you have erroneous data to aide in your theatrical performance. ...

posted by: In_the_field on September 11, 2010 7:22pm

Speaking from the inside;

This report does not include all calls the fire service responded to last year. At the end of the year, the NHFD had responded to over 23,000 calls, not 17,000. The NHFD is the busiest fire department in the state by thousands of calls per year, and provides ALS service, which no other comparable city provides (which also provides revenue—as do fire trucks on MVA's, HAZMATS, and any incident that insurance companies can be held liable for—the money goes into the general fund). The department is finally on course to attain the level of service that is known as safe and efficient nationwide, and now some uneducated posters want to return to how bad service was 15 years ago? Makes no sense. Thank goodness those of you who think this don't run the city. I bet you would have 6 cops, 5 firemen, 1 parks guy, 1 sanitation guy, and 10 teachers

I hate to tell all of you who think the old way was the best way should do a little research in response times and patient outcomes....they weren't that good, that is why responses changed. The reason fire trucks go first is to provide first responder aide until a Paramedic gets there—if all you have is several 2 man crews then who puts out the fires, backs them up, handles HAZMATS, People stuck on East Rock, Terrorist Attacks (been 2 in the last 20 years), extrications, and many more calls you people obviously don't think about. I'm not disagreeing that changes can be made, but going the suggested path increases risk, injury potential, and threatens the good and ever increasing level of service New Haven residents receive right now. I am sure NHFD union members will give up some benefits to help the city get through the tough times.

posted by: Doyens on September 12, 2010 7:51pm

In the field and Billy:

Fire calls in the city account for only 10% of all the calls the fire department rolls on. The only way you get to 23000 calls is because the department rolls trucks on every auto accident, every medical call and of course the fires. As for what the latest greatest is from the industry rags, they are in the business of stoking the fires and cashing in on the whole first responder gravey train. The initiative has been completely prostituted - first responders weren't designed to be ambulance advance people except in the cases like 9/11 or something that could be a 9/11. As for the overtime, yes, firemen get straight time overtime. But there is \$3 million guaranteed for the year. And of course, that fits in with the pension plight and the rest. Fewer firemen, fewer fire houses doesn't mean we are less safe or that response times will be greatly increased. If that were the case, we should put a firehouse on every corner.

posted by: Edward Francis on September 13, 2010 11:24am

To those who want to reduce the fire service in the City of New Haven it would be appropriate for those who comment to identify the Fire Station or Stations that you want to eliminate. Its nice to have all the answers when

you don't have to put your life on the line.

posted by: Doyens on September 13, 2010 12:56pm

Edward:

I for one, don't know which firehouse ought to be closed or where they should be strategically placed. I suspect, although do not claim to know for certain, that no expert has been asked to look at this before or since the current firehouses were established. Like the schools having no analysis done, I suspect money was available, we built them. That seems to be how things are done in New Haven. Before any house is closed, a strategic fire expert should be brought in to determine this as well what kind of staffing, the profile of the department, how many people we need for that profile and and what kinds of calls we roll on.

posted by: In_the field on September 13, 2010 12:56pm

Doyens,

I don't disagree improvements can be made, but you ... think the fire service should go back to an era with Cadillac ambulances and no paramedic service because it is less costly. Services cost money, and you may call it the "grave train," I prefer to call it protecting the citizens and general public efficiently and effectively—not undermanned hoping the worst never happens—like you. As far as what was intended for first responders, you know not what you speak—first responders have been around since long before 9/11 I hate to tell you. The intent is to provide life saving, or life aiding care in a fast, effective manner until transport can be accomplished—wait times in NH can be as long as 20-30 min. with the AMR right now, especially on a weekend.

As far as response times,

... If you cut services, then response times will be increased. Which in turn increases life-loss, property-loss, and increases insurance rates to taxpayers. And yes, 23,000 calls because the NHFD responds to every EMS, Fire, and other emergency that other services—i.e. Police, Parks, Ambulance—cannot handle—the firefighters get paid to do what others won't. The report was 6,000 calls off...Find me another FD in the area as busy as NHFD—you can't. But I know, to you, the firefighters are just mooches on your tax dollar until you need the service.

I would like to know how you came about your knowledge of what is best for the fire service. Opinions like yours are what make services suffer, decay, and then eventually have to be massively overhauled because they realize what a mistake it was to cut them in the first place.

Sorry buddy, but I don't agree with thinkers like you who decry—lets hope it never happens. I would rather err on the side of caution and say—well it has happened, and it can happen again, so lets be prepared.

posted by: JAK on September 13, 2010 2:20pm

In the Field, I don't read Doyens to say he is against safety. When you roll a hook and ladder with 4 firefighters to attend to every person who falls down on the sidewalk (for whatever reason)you are wasting taxpayer money. This is money that could be used for all sorts of things, including things that can make us safe. Lets get experts in to tell us how to be efficiently safe.

posted by: Doyens on September 13, 2010 4:12pm

In The Field:

... Sost of your depiction of my thoughts are inaccurate to be generous. You distort it about as good as the mayor. And finally, the fire department rolls on everything, not just the calls "nobody else can handle." That's a pantload.

posted by: Edward Francis on September 13, 2010 4:40pm

Doyens, lets not jump the gun with rhetoric. Fire Houses in New Haven have been closed. Fire Companies in New Haven have been eliminated.

Fire Houses in New Haven have been built to replace old outdated ones or to consolidate fire companies.

There use to be a fire station on Highland Street with Engine 14 assigned. There was a fire station on Edwards Street near State St. with Engine Company 8 and Hook & Ladder 6.

These two old stations were abandoned and sold after a new Fire House was built on Whitney Avenue into a more modern facility to further increase the efficiency of the department assigning Engine 8, Engine 14, and Hook & Ladder 6 together(dedicated July 27, 1963).

Over time "the experts" whoever they were (budget bureaucrats) eliminated from service Engine Company 14 and Hook & Ladder 6.

There was a Fire Station at the corner of Park & Elm Street housing Engine Company 3. There was a Fire Station on Dixwell Avenue near Munson Street with Engine Company 6 and Hook & Ladder 4 assigned.

On December 20, 1974 the new Dixwell Fire Station at the corner of Goffe & Webster Street was opened with the three above fire companies located there. In time Engine Company 3 was eliminated by "the experts" in making cuts to the budget.

These are just two examples of the elimination of fire stations, consolidation, and elimination of fire companies.

Have other New Haven fire companies fallen in its history. Yes. Where is Engine Company 1, Engine Company 2, Engine Company 7, Engine Company 12, and Hook & Ladder 5? They no longer exist in New Haven.

You state "Before any house is closed, a strategic fire expert should be brought in to determine this as well what kind of staffing, the profile of the department, how many people we need for that profile and what kinds of calls we roll on".

Would this "strategic fire expert" be a bean counter bureaucrat? Just asking.

posted by: cedarhillresident on September 13, 2010 6:41pm

Ok I am lost (not really)

But let me ask a question. How many of the NHTF guys are paramedics?? Number please. The only reason I am asking is because a majority of the calls they seem to take now a days requires one. We have an out dated hiring practice. A bunch of wondering unqualified firemen. That should be the first thing changed in my eyes. We need to start recouping more from insurance company's...(yes I know we have started).

In all honesty how many NHTF people can really say that we need what we have? Really! Come on! We have an outdate hiring and staffing practice in our dept. and it is time to change that. Yes the fire dept gets 3 mill in OT and I realize it is straight time, but geezz hartford has NO OT I repeat NO OT. Whats with that. Pg 36 of the report.

When i have asked the question why do a dozen fire trucks show up for a greezzz fire. They say just in case. Hmmm

I just think enough is enough. I love the NHTF but man come on.

And I always get a kick out of the doom and gloom post from new posters when ever the NHTF is mentioned.

posted by: Edward Francis on September 14, 2010 3:07pm

Sounds like cedarhillresident is a Monday morning quarterback. If only "she" had her signals correct.

She states "When I have asked the question why do a dozen fire trucks show up for a greezzz fire. They say just in case. Hmmm. I just think enough is enough".

First of all a dozen fire trucks have never shown up at a greezzz fire unless that "greezzz fire" went to three alarms.

Usually a fire caused by careless cooking is in a structure. Smoke from the "greezzz" extends throughout the room, then the building, then out the windows. Now cedarhillresident you spot the smoke and call 911 and report the fire. What do you think the 911 operator will dispatch to that "greezzz fire". One company!

If the fire has not extended beyond the stove most of the companies will be sent back in a short while. Who do you think will ventilate the entire building, search for possible victims of smoke inhalation, overhaul the kitchen area and assure the fire has not extended?

You also stated "And I always get a kick out of the doom and gloom post from new posters when ever the NHTF is mentioned".

Cedarhillresident has a short memory. On March 4, 1989, a four alarm fire ripped through three multi-family houses on Cedar Hill Avenue leaving one man dead and 67 people homeless.

There was a lot of doom and gloom that day including fire department injuries, one of them a career ending heart attack for a senior officer.

A little bit of advice - don't be too quick to jump on the bandwagon. You never know when the music will stop playing.

posted by: Cedarhillresident on September 14, 2010 3:40pm

Grrr to you to Ed

Doom and groom and I forgot scare tactics. oppsss

Enough is Enough is totally correct as far as I see it...and it was not referring to the dozen fire trucks at the scene of a greezzz (I'm grew up on wooster st and that is how we said it there) fire. Yes we need a fire dept but I think it is an over staffed one...ok I have a prop for you...how about we do this...have a public excessable data bank that shows how many firefighter are at work each day...how many out sick, on comp, vacation ect. how many man hours are in each fire house on a daily basis. and the calls for each of those houses on a daily bases...lets see what that shows. Especially the sick and comp time

posted by: Edward Francis on September 14, 2010 7:54pm

Cedarhillresident I'm sure the Board of Fire Commissioners review the kind of information you would like to see. Why don't you ask them so you will be a better informed NHI reader and commentator. Question: Do you know how many New Haven Firefighters have died in the line of duty? Do you know how many are injured each year? Do you know how many lives have been saved by New Haven Firefighters? Just asking.

posted by: NHJake on September 14, 2010 10:44pm

Lets keep this all in perspective, this study was conducted by bean counters. People who have no idea how or what the NHTF does day in and day out. They take a couple of departments similar to the size of New haven and compare numbers not services provided, operations, or training.

To Cedarhillresident and Doyens it's not all about money, it is about safety. Safety for the public and safety for the firefighters risking it all, for the public.

The fire department is one big insurance policy, you hope you never need to use it but it is there if you need it. The fire service is the ONLY organization that when you call you will have someone at your door within 4 minutes, no paperwork, no questions asked. Whether it is for a headache, a heart attack, a hazmat, a house fire, or water in your basement you will have a highly trained, professional crew there to address your problem.

Doyens, lets close the Fountain St firehouse and you can wait for Ellsworth Ave or Goffe St to get the AED to your house when a loved one is having a heart attack.

Cedarhillresident, Lets close Lombard St and you can wait for an Engine and Truck from Grand Ave to get to your house when it is burning. Remember....all fires start out small and a fire doubles in size every minute. response time is CRITICAL in this business.

As far as more paramedics, MOST of the medical calls we respond to do NOT require paramedic services. They only require the EMT's on the Engines. The city is going to be very disappointed when they start putting all theses paramedic units on the road and the revenue only increases a very small amount.

As far as overtime, call city hall and tell them to promote and hire. (with out screwing it up). We only have 6 chief line officers out of 12 and all can retire any day. Fill the command and officer positions then hire firefighters. Guess what???No more OT, actually a pretty simple solution

Fact of the matter is New Haven is 21 Sq miles and our firehouses are actually geographically located perfectly, just ask ISO. Close one and not only does your fire/EMS protection drop but so does your ISO rating which in turn raises insurance rates for businesses. Just another reason NOT to open a business in New Haven.

It's not as easy as you think The NHTF has been butchered over the years. And now with all the new services like hazmat, terrorist incidents, technical rescue etc. Never mind the increase training mandated by the government, OSHA etc. We are actually stretched thinner than you might think.

I am a Firefighter in New Haven and I am a resident as well and I don't like the taxes either. Of course the FD could use some streamlining and trimming of the fat. BUT reducing personnel or closing firehouses is NOT the answer. Not when we will give ILLEGAL immigrants asylum putting an enormous strain on our public services and not when schools have 4 and 5 principles making over 6 figures. Let's get our priorities straight.

posted by: Cedarhillresident on September 16, 2010 8:45am

Ed

Very good friends with one that just past and his family. Again I am much more informed than you assume. Again lets make this info public and lets review this...I am possitive there is major abuse happening....with that said I also know that there are alot of FD people that go above and beyond...I am not putting all into one catagory. But some.

posted by: In_the_field on September 16, 2010 10:08am

Doyens and Cedarhill,

Scare tactics—right—that's you trying to scare people that they are overpaying for a service that historically has been stripped by closing and consolidating companies in the past. Along with the companies Ed said—there was also a firehouse in ninth square. All the information you need is public, and there has been a professional study in the past—ans trial plans—“the Swerzy (not sire spelling) plan”—didn't work too well. It was a typical lets cut it all (like you two apparently want) type of plan. Services suffered and were eventually restored to a working order.

posted by: Doyens on September 16, 2010 1:50pm

Ed, In the Field:

Whether you want to admit it or not, we the taxpayers nor the state, can afford to run New Haven as it has been run for the past 20 years - hand to mouth and always short; intentionally underfunding pensions that were promised in better times and for dubious reasons; massive debts and departments that are rarely reviewed and where leadership never finds efficiencies.

The three biggest budgets are police, fire and education. You cannot find enough cuts or balance the budget without cutting any of these budgets. It's that simple. Other cities have cut them and it has had no material effect on safety. Fact is the role of the fire department is changing - 90% of the calls are for medical reasons. There is massive overtime because we roll too many trucks and fire leadership doesn't monitor it. Fact is the benefit package is too rich.

The same is true with the police department. The mayor said the same thing you're saying, we can't cut because of safety. He actually accused taxpayers of not caring about the more troubled neighborhoods in the city. Yet, we pay cops to wear their own clothes to work. We have insane work rules and pension benefits that reward massive overtime. Fact is we have the largest police force in the state. Some piece of that is a want, not a need.

Look at the schools - we have ten more schools than anybody in the state and fewer kids. That means 10 more principals, 10 more assistant principals; 10 more custodians, 10 more insurance policies....and it was all done with no plan, no analysis as to what we need.

This analysis has to be done for all these critical departments. You cannot keep putting your head in the sand and keep saying they'll come up with the money. The money is gone and we are functionally broke. So whether you like it or not, we have to decide what the role and mission of the fire department is and fund it appropriately; the same for poice and education. I don't pretend to have all the answers but I know where to look for them and know that if we don't get a handle on our finances and damn quick, we will be filing bankruptcy and the city employees, 73% of whom grab our money and run for the suburbs, will be SOL.

posted by: In_the field on September 16, 2010 10:34pm

Again Doyens—I don't disagree with you that some changes could be made. I think you should really look into understanding what the fire department does, how they are evolving to meet the needs of the city's taxpayers, and how they have to do it by Insurance,NFPA, and OSHA standards. Look into how much your insurance will go up, as opposed to your taxes, when you begin to close that firehouse that was 2-3 minutes, but now is 7-8 minutes away from your house. Now think about all those huge tax-paying businesses in the city—cut their closest firehouse, and their taxes go through the roof—then they leave New Haven—your taxes then go up again. Do all of this before you start minimalizing what an engine company does on a medical call, or how 2 man crews are sufficient—which they aren't.

What I disagree with in your postings is your lack of reliable facts—Hartford has not cut fire services, nor do they respond to as many calls as NHFD. In fact, they have more apparatus and manpower than the NHFD. Bridgeport has cut services timidly, and still, they do not do as many calls as New Haven. Those are the only 2 comparable cities around here. New Haven did 23,000 individual calls last year. Hartford—16,000 calls—more manpower, same fires, more apparatus—you already are getting a cut down fire department. The NHFD is doing more with less already.

75-80% of the calls are EMS in nature—not 90%. These can range from MVA's where extrication is needed, to a simple intoxicated person. If you think a series of 2 man crews can handle every EMS call in the city, you know nothing of the EMS calls in this city, the potential for scene safety to go awry—and it does quite frequently, or how many hands it takes to actually save a life. I can tell you from first hand experience—it is more than 4 hands.

FYI—the city does not train "ALL" firemen the way they are supposed to. They have skimped for years, and the NHFD is living on borrowed time. Most firefighters pay out of pocket to go to other towns for continuing education and updated trainings because they are not offered in New Haven, nor does the city pay for them. So you are already saving a large dime by not paying for your own firefighters training. They have enough respect to citizens to do it on their own.