



TOWN OF NORTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Fire-Rescue Department
70 East Main Street, MA 02766

Shawn R. Simmons
Fire Chief
Emergency Management Director

April 2, 2024
Michael Yunits
Town Manager
Town of Norton

Mr. Yunits,

I am writing in response to your request for a letter outlining the impacts of the proposed FY 25 budget cuts. Our budget request was based on level service needs, including all required contractual increases. It was calculated to maintain a minimum of 8 members on duty and to provide for the operation of Station 1 (Chartley) to facilitate equitable emergency services delivery to our community.

Currently, the recommended budget cuts reflect a \$233,120 cut in overtime and \$39,100 in fire and EMS operating expenses. As you know, approximately \$100,000 of our overtime funding is directly utilized toward holiday pay as required by the Collective Bargaining Agreement. The remaining overtime funding is utilized to fill vacancies created by contractual time off and to backfill during significant incidents and storms to maintain minimum staffing levels. This decrease in overtime funding will likely result in staffing levels dropping below our current minimum of 8 on-duty for a significant portion of the year, which could have the following direct impacts:

- Reduction in staffing to mitigate incidents safely and effectively
- Decreasing our ability to handle simultaneously calls (this occurs over 700 times a year)
- Loss of revenue if we are unable to staff a second Ambulance
- The closing of Station 1
- Response times could be increased, primarily in the western part of town
- Increased reliance on mutual aid
- Less coverage with emergency call-back to cover significant incidents and storms
- Decreased training for members
- Decrease in our availability to provide non-emergency services to the public
- Our ability to have specialist personnel work on projects, regulatory compliance, and training needs
- Our Insurance Services Organization (ISO) rating could deteriorate. This is a 1-10 rating where the lowest number is best, we are currently rated at a 3. This rating is used to develop property loss cost and underwriting calculations for insurance.
- Reduction in Community Public Expenditure (CPE) reimbursement

Indirectly, the budget cuts will have a negative impact on department morale, along with a detrimental effect on recruitment and retention, which has already been an ongoing challenge. It will also impede our ability to provide mutual aid while our use of mutual aid will increase.

As always, we will work diligently to provide the best services to our community with our allocated funding. However, the degree of the change in services will be impacted by many variables that are out of our control. These include the number of retirements, injuries, storms, major incidents, and extended leaves allowed by the contract and law. For example, there are no requirements for advance notification of retirement, and it takes a year on average to replace the position. This void is generally filled by overtime, as is the case with the other extended leaves.

The impacts on operational expenses will also be challenging. We have always sought the best prices, negotiated with vendors, and pursued grants whenever possible. That said, there are few opportunities to find savings and maintain level services. This is concerning as much of our request is for fixed costs, contractual items, regulatory requirements, and the replacement of consumables utilized in our operations.

I feel that is also worth noting that our budget request was for level service with no new positions. I mention this as the topic of the personnel we added three years ago utilizing the SAFER grant has come up several times. After discussing with you and multiple boards, committees, and public venues, a collaborative plan was developed to systematically increase the contribution from the ambulance account to offset this expense. Last year, we increased the Ambulance Account contribution by \$150,000, and this year, an additional \$150,000 will be added. This amount exceeds the amount required to offset the addition of these positions.

Our department does and will continue to strive to provide the highest quality and the highest level of service to our community. We are focused on providing this service in a safe, effective, and efficient manner while carefully balancing risk management and fiscal prudence. To that end, we welcome any constructive feedback or suggestions for improvement and are always happy to answer any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your dedication and service to our town, and I look forward to working collaboratively with you and the Finance Committee as we work to serve the needs of our community now and into the future.

Respectfully submitted,



Shawn Simmons

Fire Chief