

Wichita Falls: Times Record News

Public safety in mind

City Council set to address list of concerns on strategic plan

By Robert Morgan/Times Record News

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Evaluating internal operations of the police department and maintaining an adequate number of officers and firefighters are the first concerns members of the Wichita Falls City Council will address with an 11-item strategic plan.

An evaluation of the police department's structure involves an in-house study of the department followed by possible review by an outside firm.

The in-house evaluation will incorporate the salary survey by **Waters Consulting Group**, a consultant firm analyzing the city's job classifications and salaries. Waters is set to begin its study Monday.

Assistant City Manager Matt Benoit described the in-house evaluation as deciding whether the department needs more officers or more supervisors.

Benoit compiled the information used for the strategic plan and said the department was looking for the "most bang for our buck."

Too many officers and too few superiors can adversely affect a department's effectiveness, Chris Heaton, executive director of the Texas Municipal Police Association, said. His organization has conducted similar surveys.

Heaton spoke with the Times Record News about general problems affecting police departments.

Supervisors only need four or five officers under them. Any more and a department begins to lose sight of its needs, Heaton said.

Police Chief Dennis Bachman said he thought the findings would point toward a need for more people. Departments are usually short because cities do not want to free up money, he said.

If the city is serious about the department's structure, Bachman said, it should work to reduce the load of detectives who work more than 90 cases each now.

"Case loads will be a big factor," Jim Ginnings, council member at-large, said about the study's intent.

Ginnings has repeatedly called public safety his number one goal as a council member. His main concern is reducing case loads to a more workable level.

Case loads reflect response time, Heaton said. The amount of time an officer is committed can greatly affect his or her patrol and response time.

"Heavy case loads negatively impact the quality of services," he explained.

Heaton said, ideally, 40 percent of an officer's time should be spent patrolling.

As for maintaining an adequate number of officers, Bachman said the department "probably has more people on staff than ever before."

"But we always need men," he added.

Bachman said the constant need stems from pulling officers off regular duty and placing them on special task forces, like the department's gang unit.

Earl Foster, chief of the Wichita Falls Fire Department, said a state law is causing his department to feel the sting of too few men. The law, SB 382 or "Two-In, Two-Out," states that for two firefighters to enter a burning structure there must be two other firefighters outside at the scene.

Because only three firefighters ride an engine, Foster said the law means "the department has to sit and wait for proper numbers." Imminent rescue is the only exception to the rule.

The fire department applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency grant funds to pay for six additional firefighters for five years, but Foster doubts the grant was approved.

Although the department hasn't received a rejection letter, Foster said he knew all the money has been handed out to other departments. It costs approximately \$260,000 a year to staff six firefighters.

To decide what determines adequate personnel, the city plans to study similar sized municipalities - Abilene, Waco, Midland - and see how they manage.

Benoit said one of the questions looked at during the comparison would be how do other fire departments handle the "Two-In, Two-Out" law.

Council members and city staffers decided on these public safety focus areas during a series of strategic planning meetings earlier this year. The city was lead in the meetings

by Austin-based consultant Robena Jackson, who received a reported \$12,000 for her services.

The council officially accepted the strategic plan at Tuesday's council meeting. Besides goals for public safety, the plan highlights 10 other items in need of improvements.

The city's planned goal for public safety reads, "Provide the optimal level of police, fire and health protection as determined by our citizens."

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