

City of Round Rock

City Manager Meetings with Fire Department

August 12, 2010

Purpose of Meetings and Report

City Manager Jim Nuse and Assistant City Manager Cindy Demers held 25 meetings (schedule attached) with fire department personnel over the last three weeks to gain a better understanding of the underlying concerns in the department that led to the Round Rock Firefighters Association votes of no confidence in the Fire Chief and Assistant Fire Chief. While the two separate MAG reports provide some independent assessment of the La Frontera fire and management issues identified by the Association, they did not give enough insight into the real concerns of the fire department staff. These meetings were intended to provide an opportunity for a frank, open dialogue with City Administration to discover ways to move forward in a positive manner. This report is intended to articulate the issues at a high level consistently heard during the discussions however it will not offer solutions for moving forward. That will be handled in a separate document.

Ground Rules

To have these types of open discussions the fire department staff needed to feel a level of trust regarding how their comments were being taken and how the information would be used. The meetings had no agenda and discussion could go wherever the participants wanted. Demers took notes only to ensure comments were captured correctly to develop this report. In addition, it is understood that Fire Department personnel do not want to be seen as complainers and there is no question that their first priority is the citizens of Round Rock and the citizens will continue to receive a high level of fire and emergency services no matter what internal issues exist.

Report of Comments

From the comments received, a set of recurring themes evolved throughout the discussions. Unless noted, only themes that were heard in at least 75% of the meetings have been identified in this report. However it is important to note that there were many other relevant comments that will be considered as we move forward.

In addition, in a majority of the meetings, there was recognition that Chief Hodge has done a tremendous amount of work changing the department in the last five years. The success is evident in obtaining additional staff and stations, newer state of the art equipment, improved compensation and providing much needed change in into evolving into a more professional fire department.

La Frontera Fire

All parties recognize that there are some inaccuracies reported in the MAG report regarding the La Frontera fire. Nevertheless, a few prevalent comments regarding the fire came through in the discussions:

- Current practice is that fire pre plans are not done until certificate of occupancy is issued. Consider changing this practice to do plans well in advance of building completion.
- Safety, specifically firefighter accountability and overwork of firefighters due to no outside assistance was a concern during the fire.

- Perceptions of a lack of follow up and missed learning opportunities are prevalent. Feeling there is a lot to be learned but for some reason there appears to be little interest in a departmental comprehensive debrief.

Management

The MAG report is inaccurate in reporting that firefighters want to run the stations independent of each other. Consistency among the stations is important but when it comes to small stuff or district specific needs there is a desire for more independence on what is right for that station.

Staff understands the need for rules and accountability but the current policy driven system creates a punitive environment with very limited trust. Comments associated with this include:

- There are too many policies to keep up with and they are constantly changing.
- Often there is not an understanding by lower levels as to why certain policies exist.
- Policies are created as a result of specific situations (can attach a name to the policy).
- Staff is receiving counseling or being written up on minor issues with at times no discretion by the direct supervisor.
- A significant amount of time is believed wasted on insignificant or wrong issues.
- Officers are not allowed to take care of issues at the lowest level therefore escalation causes additional work for higher levels.
- The Red Book is an important tool that assists in accountability however there is a lack of discretion available in its application.
- Training (assessment center) is seen as punitive as opposed to safe opportunity to learn.
- There is a perception of inconsistent application of disciplinary action. Specifically it was noted that shift personnel are treated differently than the administrative personnel.
- Personnel that bring issues up or raise their voice appear to get on radar screen for scrutiny.

Consistent comments were made regarding the ability of officers and firefighters to do their jobs without fear of micromanagement. The current system sets an environment of the perception that all decisions are questioned which makes staff second guess their decision making, particularly in emergency situations. This significantly impacts their ability to do their job effectively. Accountability is necessary but the feeling of trust to do their job is not there.

Taking units out of service for training is a concern. There is no clear understanding as to why several units can go out of service at one time for training but not utilized to provide aid to others when requested.

Perception that the Assistant Chief regularly works outside the chain of command from the top down but staff is expected to follow from the bottom up.

The following concerns were noted regarding the reassigning or moving staff:

- The reassignment of staff is seen as management not taking care of or addressing the real problems, just moving them around. There is also a feeling that reassignments are done as punishment.
- General movement of personnel (not necessarily disciplinary) is seen as disruptive to the building of relationships and trust needed to perform at the highest level.

Communication

Communication up, down and sideways is not successful and very inconsistent. Communication among shifts is inconsistent. Many of the issues raised in this report may well be a result of communication problems. There is a lack of understanding about the direction of the department and a recognition that rumors run rampant.

The Firefighters Association is invited to every staff meeting to observe, participate and help communicate what is happening in staff meetings. It was noted in a few of the meetings that the Association rarely, if ever, attends the meetings.

Culture and Leadership

Several items articulated can be classified under culture and leadership as follows:

- There is a lack of desire and motivation to promote due to the current culture.
- Experienced people are leaving too soon or demoting due to the culture.
- Chief does not get to know firefighters and rarely goes to stations to talk with the staff. They recognize he is busy and don't expect him to be there all the time but the lack of effort is noted by the staff.
- Culture that has been created makes staff feel like objects and are dispensable.
- Trust issues are prevalent at all levels of the department.
- Desire to have some level of family culture as described/inspired by Chief Lasky.
- Fire leadership is not exhibiting core values but expecting lower levels to follow the values.
- There is a lack of inspirational leadership.
- A strong concern that the Round Rock Fire Department is being perceived as "the island" by other area departments due to limited giving and taking of aid.

Training Facility

Fire Department personnel at all levels believe a Round Rock Fire Department training facility would be a tremendous benefit to the City and the Department.

In summary, all of the items whether real or perceived have created significant morale issues for the department. A follow up to this report will be forthcoming.

Round Rock Fire Department

Schedule of City Manager meetings with fire personnel

Date/Time	Shift	City Administration Attendees
July 20, 2010 1:00 pm	Station 2, Shift B	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 20, 2010 2:00 pm	Station 3, Shift B	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 20, 2010 4:00 pm	Station 4, Shift B	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 21, 2010 10:00 am	Station 6, Shift C	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 21, 2010 4:00 pm	Station 4, Shift C	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 22, 2010 11:00 am	Station 4, Shift A	Jim Nuse
July 22, 2010 1:00 pm	Central, Shift A	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 26, 2010 1:00 pm	Station 7, Shift B	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 26, 2010 2:00 pm	Station 6, Shift B	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 26, 2010 4:00 pm	Central, Shift B	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 27, 2010 8:00 am	Station 2, Shift C	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 27, 2010 9:00 am	Station 5, Shift C	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 27, 2010 1:00 pm	Central, Shift C	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 27, 2010 4:00 pm	Station 7, Shift C	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 28, 2010 9:00 am	Station 3, Shift A	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 28, 2010 10:00 am	Station 5, Shift A	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 28, 2010 2:00 pm	Station 2, Shift A	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 28, 2010 3:00 pm	Station 7, Shift A	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
July 30, 2010 1:00 pm	Station 3, Shift C	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
August 3, 2010 3:00 pm	Station 6, Shift A	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
August 3, 2010 4:00 pm	Training Staff	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
August 4, 2010 1:00 pm	Station 5, Shift B	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
August 5, 2010 4:00 pm	Administration Staff	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
August 6, 2010 1:00 pm	Prevention Staff	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers
August 9, 2010 8:30 am	Battalion Chiefs	Jim Nuse, Cindy Demers