



City of Homer

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Office of the City Manager

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Memorandum 22-199

TO: Mayor Castner and Homer City Council
FROM: Rob Dumouchel, City Manager
DATE: October 31, 2022
SUBJECT: Volunteer Fire Staff and Fleet Support

The Volunteer Fire Department needs help. I'd like to use FY22 surplus operating funds to fund a level of staffing sufficient to meet the increasing demands on the Department. Over the years the call volumes have increased, volunteerism has declined, and the fleet has aged with few replacements. All of these items together are having negative impacts on the Department's ability to operate and provide services at the level expected by the community.

I am requesting two full time firefighter/EMT positions to be funded through FY25 with surplus funds from FY22, and one new ambulance to be purchased with the help of Code Blue Grant Program funds and General Fund Fleet CARMA.

Volunteer Fire Department Call Volume Increases

There has been a large increase in calls over the last two years, and we're forecasting upwards of 750 calls for 2022. During COVID, we brought on two emergency hires which helped mitigate some of the impact the pandemic had on volunteerism. When the emergency hire funding expired, the calls did not decrease. Compounding this issue is the fact that many calls overlap requiring the Department to respond to multiple emergencies simultaneously. Responding to an ever increasing volume of calls with less staff is not sustainable.

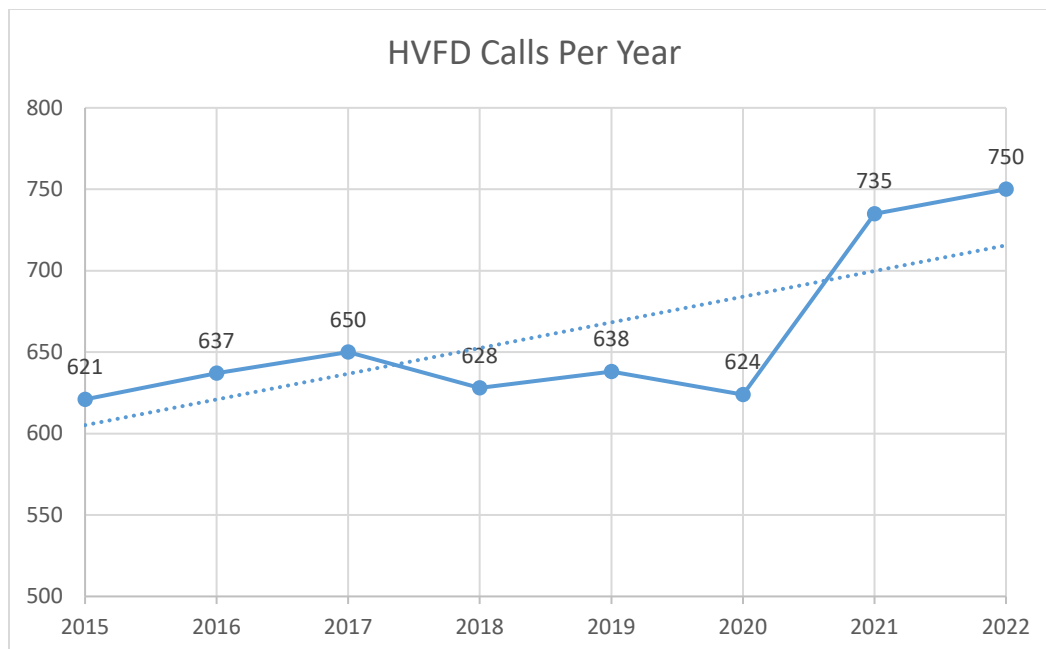
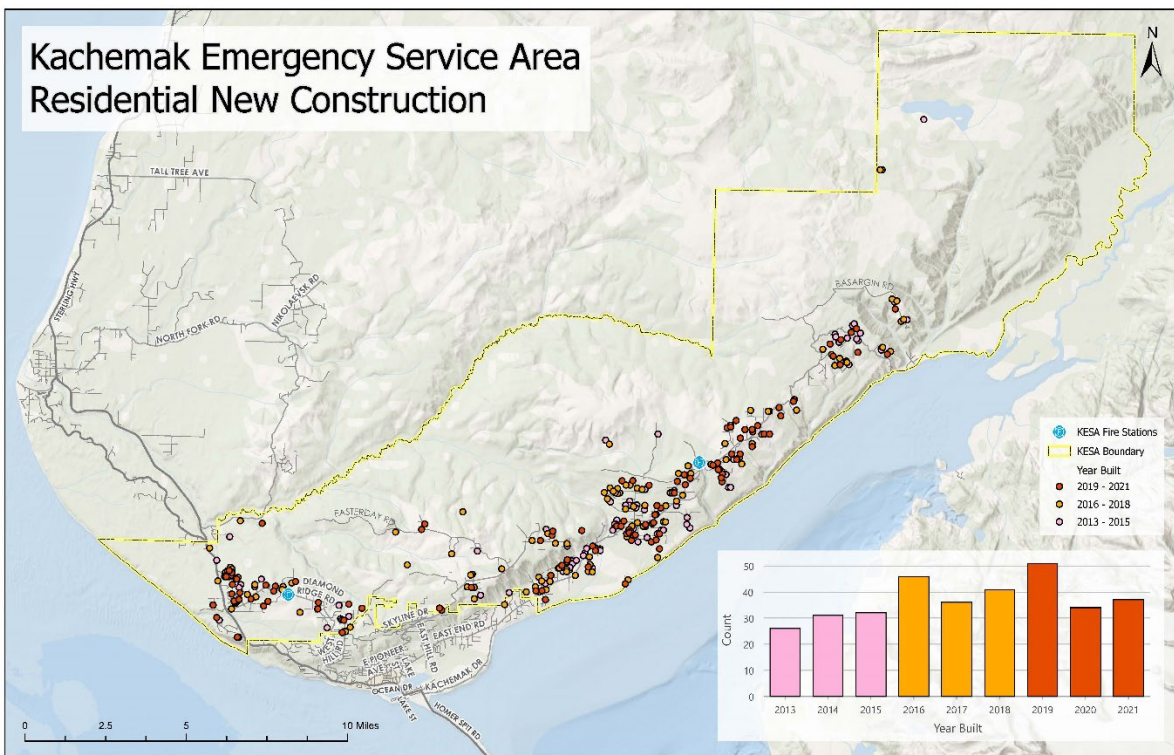
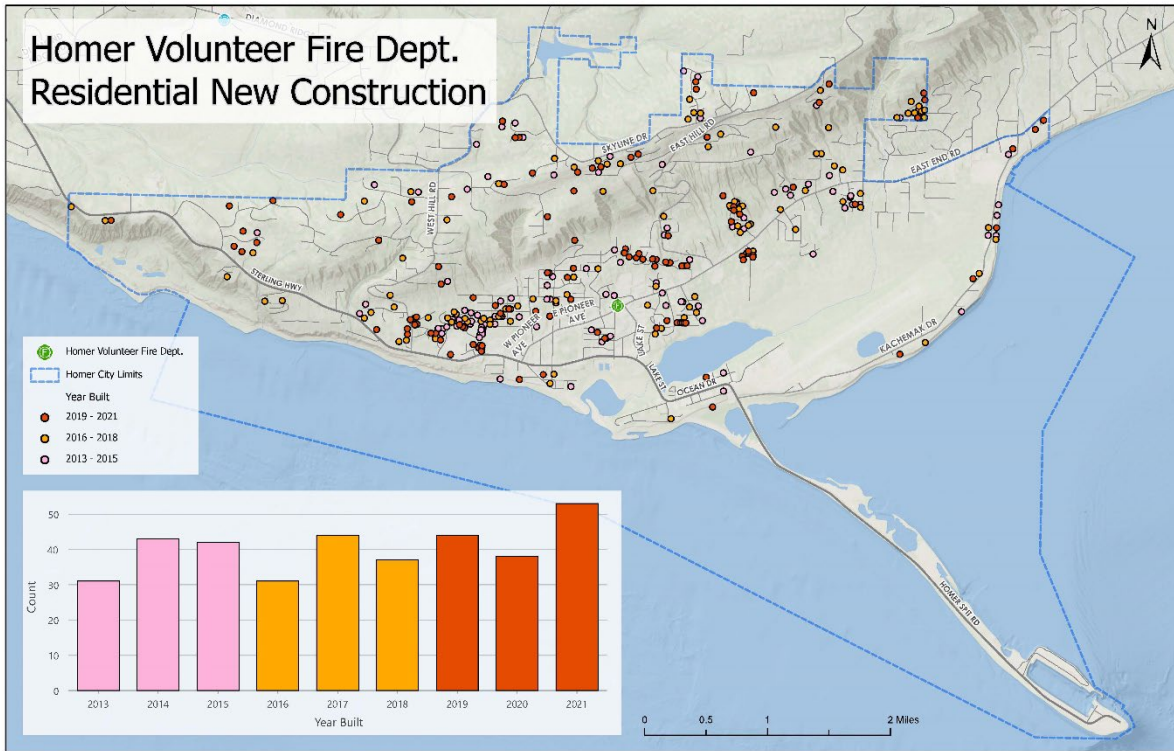


Figure 1: HVFD calls per year 2015 to 2022 (2022 volume is estimated based on YTD calls)

New Structure Development in the Homer Area

The increase in calls is not surprising given the fact that many new units of housing have been built in the past decade. The following maps provided by the Kenai Peninsula Borough show the distribution of recent development within Homer city limits, and just outside.



Fire Volunteerism Context

At the same time call volumes are increasing, volunteerism is declining. Volunteerism is an important part of the Department's culture and history. We have to acknowledge the fact that the opportunity cost of being a volunteer firefighter is enormous. We, like volunteer fire departments all over the country, are putting considerable effort into finding ways to modernize volunteer programs in ways that will improve volunteer recruitment and retention (this is also a 2022 Council priority project). The reality of the situation, however, is that over time it has become significantly more difficult to become a volunteer firefighter. It has also become more difficult to make a living in Homer and have sufficient time available for a very demanding volunteer position. The impact of decreased volunteerism is particularly evident in the number of calls run by Chief Officers. In September and October 2022, the chiefs ran between 20 to 30 calls each, 44% of which were between the hours of 5pm and 8am. Only one volunteer has made as many calls as any of the chiefs for that time period. The downward pressure on volunteerism requires an increase in career positions to ensure that we can provide the level of service the community expects from the Department.

Borough-wide Comparison: Calls, Staffing, and Budgets

It's helpful to view Homer in comparison with other fire departments in the Kenai Peninsula Borough. Our closest neighbors and mutual aid partners are the Kachemak Emergency Service Area (KESA), and Western Emergency Services (WES) which was created in 2021 as a combination of the Anchor Point Fire and Emergency Medical Service Area (APFEMSA) and Ninilchik Emergency Services (NES). Despite serving a more developed area and conducting significantly more calls, HVFD has the smallest budget and firefighting staff on the southern peninsula.

	HVFD	KESA	WES
Calls per Year	750+	275	525
Full Time Personnel	7 FT Fire Personnel 1 admin	7 FT Fire Personnel Hiring 2 more soon	10 FT Fire personnel Requesting 6 more this year
Volunteers	27 Volunteers on the roster, 10 actively responding to calls and overnight shifts	20 volunteers on the roster, 5 actively responding to calls, no overnight shifts	31 volunteers on the roster, 20 actively responding to calls and overnight shifts
Annual Budget (FY23)	\$1,4540,719	\$2,194,150	\$2,389,500
Community ISO Rating	4	5	5

What about Grants?

We have very actively pursued grants for both personnel and fire apparatus. Fire-related national grant programs are very competitive and we have had limited success with large requests. We have federal grants under review for two firefighter/EMT positions and a Type 5 Brush/Mini-Attack Vehicle (to replace the failing Brush1). If we were to be granted the firefighter/EMT positions requested through the SAFER program on top of the request I am making to Council, the increased capacity would be a great opportunity to invest a significant amount of time into emergency preparedness and training (a Council priority).

Firefighter/EMT Request

Adding two new full-time firefighter/EMT positions would help the Department to maintain minimum staffing 24/7. Ideally, we'd add a third position in the near future to provide coverage for sick leave, vacations, training, etc. The alternative to increasing our staffing is spending significantly more money on overtime and potentially burning out a team of highly trained employees.

The plan for funding these hires is to use surplus operating funds from FY22 to fully fund the positions through the end of the FY24/25 budget. The General Fund had an operating surplus of approximately \$692,000 and I am requesting that we set aside \$652,500 to fund two “fully loaded” positions for two and half years.

I see this proposal similar to giving ourselves a grant from the General Fund Fund Balance. With the time between now and FY26, staff will work to ensure that we can sustainably absorb this expense into our operating budget.

Fire Fleet Context

The Department is also having struggles with fleet vehicles. Fleet issues have been discussed multiple times at Council and the overhaul of the entire fleet is going to be very expensive and will have to occur over multiple years. The majority of the fleet is very old and vehicles are starting to fail in ways that we may not be able to bring them back into service. For instance, the brush truck (a vehicle equipped to respond to fires in areas difficult to access with a larger piece of fire apparatus) is likely to be part of the next City surplus sale because it can no longer meet its mission in a dependable way. While we do have bright spots, like the new pumper/tanker we have on order for 2024, it’s going to take a while to effectively meet the needs of the Fire/EMS fleet.

At this time, we are due for an ambulance replacement and we have been awarded grant funds that will help reduce the cost to the City. I would like to make sure we leverage those funds into a replacement vehicle while we have them available.

Ambulance Request

MEDIC1 was put into service in 1997 and scheduled for replacement in 2022. If we put in an order before the end of 2022, the earliest we would expect the replacement vehicle is late 2024.

Earlier this year, the Department applied for a Code Blue grant which awarded us \$45,000 towards the purchase of an ambulance. I would like to take advantage of that grant to supplement the replacement of an ambulance.

Staff Recommendation: Introduce and approve ordinances authorizing the funding of two full-time firefighter/EMT positions through the end of FY25 and the purchase of a new ambulance.

CITY OF HOMER
FINANCIAL SUPPLEMENT

PROJECT NAME	<u>Purchase of Ambulance</u>	DATE	<u>11/09/2022</u>
DEPARTMENT	<u>Fire</u>	SPONSOR	<u>City Manager/Fire Chief</u>
REQUESTED AMOUNT	<u>\$ 300,000</u>		

DESCRIPTION	<p>The fire fleet is aging and in need of replacement. The ambulance known as MEDIC1 went into service in 1997 and has been scheduled for replacement in 2022. It's important to order a vehicle as soon as possible because supply chain issues are such that delivery is expected to take up to 24 months.</p> <p>The Homer Volunteer Fire Department applied for and was awarded \$55,000 from the Alaska Code Blue Grant Program to assist with the funding of a new ambulance.</p>
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FUNDING SOURCE(S)	OPERATING	GF CARMA	GF FLEET CARMA	PORT RESERVES	WATER CARMA
	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
	HAWSP	HART-ROADS	HART-TRAILS	PORT FLEET RESERVES	SEWER CARMA
	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

FUNDING SOURCE 1: GF Fleet CARMA	FUNDING SOURCE 2:	FUNDING SOURCE 3:
Current Balance <u>\$ 2,106,604</u>	Current Balance _____	Current Balance _____
Encumbered <u>\$ 1,211,070</u>	Encumbered _____	Encumbered _____
Requested Amount <u>\$ 300,000</u>	Requested Amount _____	Requested Amount _____
Other Items on Current Agenda <u>\$ 0</u>	Other Items on Current Agenda _____	Other Items on Current Agenda _____
Remaining Balance <u>\$ 595,534</u>	Remaining Balance _____	Remaining Balance _____
FUNDING SOURCE 4:	FUNDING SOURCE 5:	FUNDING SOURCE 6:
Current Balance _____	Current Balance _____	Current Balance _____
Encumbered _____	Encumbered _____	Encumbered _____
Requested Amount _____	Requested Amount _____	Requested Amount _____
Remaining Balance _____	Remaining Balance _____	Remaining Balance _____

ORDINANCE REFERENCE SHEET
2022 ORDINANCE
ORDINANCE 22-81

An Ordinance of the City Council of Homer, Alaska, Amending the FY23 Capital Budget by Accepting and Appropriating a Reimbursable Code Blue Grant in the Amount of \$55,000 and Appropriating an Amount not to exceed \$300,000 from the General Fund Fleet Capital Asset Repair and Maintenance (CARMA) Fund for the Purchase of an Ambulance.

Sponsor: City Manager/Fire Cheif

1. City Council Regular Meeting November 14, 2022 Introduction

Memorandum 22-199 from City Manager as backup