

Duluth Fire Department

Department Assessment 2008



“Dedicated to save life and property by safeguarding our citizens through progressive building inspection, fire prevention, public education, responding to emergencies, and adapting to meet the needs of our community.”

Current State of the Fire Department

The current state of the fire department could best be described as “in transition”. Over the last fifteen months, nearly 20% of the fire department’s staff has retired. While many experienced fire fighters have left, they have been replaced by a young enthusiastic work force.

The turnover has presented the fire department administration with challenges, as well as opportunities. Our firefighters continue to provide an excellent professional public safety service to the community. However, with the loss of seasoned firefighters, apparatus staffing levels have become more of a concern. To address this, we have applied for a Federal grant and developed a plan that would utilize federally funded fire fighters to meet national staffing standards. This would involve a major restructuring of the department. The young workforce has made training a priority. We are providing basic fire fighting training through advanced officer training.

The Fire Prevention Division provides excellent inspection, investigation, and public education services. The division does an outstanding job with the resources provided. They understand there is much more that is needed in the prevention field. The prevention division works closely with fire fighters in prevention efforts. Some of the initiatives in this report will expand on this partnership. Fire prevention is also involved with the Building Safety re-organization. These divisions are closely connected. They share the same mission and work out of the same model code. We hope to find efficiencies sharing resources.

A recent analysis of the Building Safety division identified issues that if improved would enhance the services and streamline processes. Building Safety is in the midst of a reorganization process. We are using an external consultant to help us identify process issues, improve the work process, and enhance customer service. Our goal is to make the building permit process as user friendly as possible, while maintaining our appropriate code review and enforcement. We have a hard working staff that has been under a cloud of negative publicity. The cloud remains, but through the re-organization we are working to turn that image around.

The fire administration has a good understanding of the budget process and has been successful at purchasing apparatus and equipment to support our mission. Since a large percentage of our budget resources pay for personnel salaries, we must be creative on spending money to maintain our equipment and provide for basic operation needs. In the last 6 months, we received over \$1,000,000 in Federal grants to replace critical safety equipment.

Lack of supervisory staff has impacted our ability to work on short and long term planning as well as new initiatives. With only two supervisors, our time is occupied with daily operations, building safety issues, and emergency management issues. Additional supervisors are needed to enhance efficiency and allow senior management to focus on policy development, planning, staff development, and department accountability. Most of the department’s leadership will retire in the next five years creating a need for a succession plan. The initiatives found later in this report will increase services and accountability. However, establishing programs without sufficient supervisory staff will impact on the improvements chance of success.

The administration maintains excellent relationships with other departments and works hard to nurture those relationships. The administration has also developed a formal and informal communication system with employees. It’s these relationships that will support the initiatives/improvements of the future found in the body of this report.

STRENGTHS

- Working relationships with other departments (Teamwork)
- Understanding of budget process
- Efficient rolling stock replacement program
- Successful at acquiring Federal grants augmenting funding of critical projects and equipment purchases
- Administrators and support staff committed to provide the best support possible to the efficient fire department operations.
- The department is well respected in the community and throughout the state.
- Good communication between fire administration and employees

- Supervisory training for upcoming department leaders.
- Expanded relationships with civic and business organizations.
- Addition of supervisory employees.
- Cross training of staff to provide more services to the community.
- Comprehensive Management Study of the Fire Department to address Short and Long term planning, NFPA 1710, future EMS role, etc.
- Teamwork building with other city departments.
- Increased grant writing
- Participation on state radio advisory committee to have input into future regional communications upgrades

OPPORTUNITIES

WEAKNESSES

- Not enough supervisors to be proactive in planning and new initiatives
- Under funded Emergency Management program
- Limited capital dollars for significant need in building improvements.
- Need to complete the update of the Standard Operation Guidelines
- Ineffective fire and EMS incident reporting software
- Delays in hiring caused by Civil Service System
- Lack of long term planning
- Lack of city policy training
- Limited amount of people that understand the Emergency Operations Plan.

- Significant loss of department leadership in next five years due to retirements with no succession plan.
- Increased demand for limited tax dollars
- PERA Amortization Aid in 2008 and 2009
- Cost of FCC Radio communication 2013 mandate to move all radio communications to arrow band.
- Unknown future unfunded mandates by state and federal government.
- State budget deficit
- The instability in Federal, State, and City economy
- Rapidly increasing costs to maintain basic services

THREATS

STRENGTHS

- Good working relationships with other departments
- Established EMT program
- Well established safety committee
- Experienced Captains.
- Progressive fire suppression, EMS, and rescue services
- Employees are generally young, dedicated, and enthusiastic.
- The fire apparatus replacement program has provided reliable equipment to respond to emergencies
- Hazardous materials team
- New Hire testing and background checks to insure quality personnel
- Specialized emergency services

- Expansion of fire fighters role concerning quality of life issues
- Reorganization of department and SAFER grant application to address adequate rig staffing.
- Recruitment efforts to have more diverse pool of fire fighter candidates.
- Cooperative training efforts with Lake Superior College
- Expansion of EMS services
- Formation of a training alliance to share resources with other departments.
- Establishment of a formalized employee evaluation, development and recognition programs.

OPPORTUNITIES

WEAKNESSES

- Lack of updated Standard Operating Guidelines.
- Lack of training safety budget
- Lack of suitable training site
- Loss of experienced members of the department due to mass retirements.
- Substandard staffing in peripheral fire stations impacting fire fighting
- The department is behind the curve in the use of technology to enhance services and safety.
- Limited capital dollars has impacted building upgrades.
- Limited leadership training
- Water supply infrastructure reliability
- Computer programs and network reliability

- Loss of experienced personnel
- New OSHA requirements for fire operations
- New standards requiring more costly personal protective equipment
- Not meeting NFPA 1710 standards
Lack of resources to support new programs and initiatives
- Expanded hazards such as pandemic response, weapons of mass destruction, and bioterrorism.
- Reductions in local government aid affecting ability to maintain services.
- Loss of employees to other fire departments is increasing
- Lack of incentive for employees to promote

THREATS

STRENGTHS

- Competent, trained, and dedicated employees
- Cooperative working relationship with Building Safety and State Fire Marshal Office
- Aggressive origin and cause investigation
- Grant writing ability
- Occupation permit program
- Juvenile fire setter program
- Community support programs
- Company level elementary school Program
- General fire safety education programs
- Involvement in new construction early on in the process

- Grants available for various fire prevention programs
- Accreditation to self Assess
- Pending management retirements in future to allow for promotional opportunities
- Community growth
- Fire sprinkler/fire alarm permitting and approval program
- Rental housing inspection program
- Fire prevention officer development training
- Company Level Fire Prevention Training
- Regional Arson Investigation task force (Expand resources without expanding staff cost)

OPPORTUNITIES

WEAKNESSES

- Staffing levels in Prevention do not allow absorption of additional responsibilities.
- Lack of fire prevention officer development program
- Lack of time to pursue grants
- Lack of experience in Fire Prevention Bureau for investigation, plan review, and education
- Lack of performance objectives
- Promotional exam process
- Lack on annual inspection program
- Hazardous materials
- Primarily reactive in nature
- Criminal side of arson Investigation
- Coordination with building safety in fire department plan reviews

- Pending turnover in Fire Prevention Bureau (revolving door)
- Minimal Interaction with operations division
- Community growth (needs exceed resources)
- Increased demands for services
- Limited budget for prevention division
- Rental housing Inspections (lack of fire related enforcement from housing inspectors.
- Increased workload for existing staff (potential)
- Challenge of organizational change
- Minimal Job related training opportunities – industry outpacing resources

THREATS

STRENGTHS

- Competent, trained, and dedicated employees
- Established working relationships with other departments
- Good relationship with other agencies
- Good relationship with design community
- Continuing education to keep staff technically informed
- Many years of experience in city government & Institutional knowledge
- Employees desire for change
- Cooperative effort in shared duties
- Ability to work independently and multi-task effectively
- Flexibility to meet changes in ordinances

- Embrace the reorganization plan as a team to enhance services and job satisfaction
- Computer Software upgrades allowing sharing of information with other departments
- Adopt Updated International Property Maintenance code
- Better public relations
- Nuisance abatement
- Administrative Citations
- Personal training safety
- Network with other jurisdictions
- Streamline development process
- Concise development guidelines
- Filter out bad plans through training
- Establish performance goals

OPPORTUNITIES

WEAKNESSES

- Lack support from the courts
- Outdated technology
- Insufficient staff to meet demands of current rental housing program
- No periodic performance evaluations
- Limited budget
- Restricted opportunity to participate in statewide groups
- Goals not defined
- Productivity not tracked
- Customer service standard not defined
- Work priorities not identified
- Inability to demolish all condemned buildings
- Building safety physical space not adequate for efficient operations.

- Misperceptions of public and press
- City Council political process
- Failure to change
- Lack of communication within departments and administration
- Failure to monitor and manage performance
- Staff not meeting performance goals
- Unable to provide adequate staff to accomplish task
- Other departments not cooperative in streamlining process
- Demands on staff concerning the schools districts rebuilding of schools.
- Compromise integrity for expediency
- Budget constraints prevent technology upgrades

THREATS

Innovative Building Safety Division - We have high expectations for improvements in the Building Safety Division. The reorganization plan is underway and the changes will be ongoing for some time. The initiatives/Improvements will be not only focused on building safety. We will also work to streamline the permit process through improved interaction and communication between other City departments and other permitting agencies. *(Provides for improved service, innovation, and accountability of public resources).*

Leadership Training – With nearly all the departments' leadership retiring in the next five years, there is a strong need for succession planning. I propose providing leadership training to all Captains on the department and a mentoring program to give future leaders the tools they need to be successful. *(Provides for improved service, innovation, and accountability of public resources).*

Active role in Quality of Life Issues - The fire department has always been a community based operation. Fire fighters often work and live in the same community. With increased demand for services and limited staff, having fire fighters take a more active role in quality of life enforcement will be essential. *(Provides for improved service, innovation, and accountability of public resources).*

Staffing to NFPA standards – National Fire Protection Association fire department staffing standards have highlighted staffing issues in the Duluth Fire Department. We have applied for a SAFER grant (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response). If we are successful in our grant application, a restructuring of the department combined with federally funded fire fighters would improve our compliance with national staffing standards. This is just the first step in meeting NFPA1710 standards. Other issues will need to be addressed in our long term planning. *(Provides for improved service, innovation, and accountability of public resources).*

Comprehensive Management Study of the Duluth Fire Department - St. Cloud and St. Paul recently completed comprehensive management studies done by professional companies. The independent audit looked at issues such as organization structure, staffing, safety, station placement, planning, expansion of EMS services, efficiencies, and all other facets of the fire service. It would be beneficial to have a study done in Duluth. We strongly support an external department study. *(Provides for improved service, innovation, and accountability of public resources).*

Increased support for Emergency Management Function - With ever increasing time demands on the Emergency Management function, increased support for staff and budget has become necessary. The Emergency Management responsibility falls on the Fire Chief. This is problematic due to the limited supervisory staff in the fire department. Emergency management must be recognized as a core city function and be supported with staff and an appropriate budget. *(Provides for improved service, innovation, and accountability of public resources).*

Most Pressing Issues Operational

Operational

NFPA 1710 Fire Apparatus Staffing – National Fire Protection Association fire department staffing and response standards have raised concerns about staffing levels on apparatus. Over the last three decades apparatus and staff have been eliminated and rig staffing has been reduced. We are currently staffed at a level that is well under recommended standards with some of the apparatus at ½ the national standard. To address this issue, we have applied for a SAFER grant (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response). If we are successful in our grant application, a restructuring of the department combined with federally funded fire fighters would improve safety on apparatus bringing us closer to meeting the staffing standards of NFPA 1710. Other requirements of NFPA 1710 would need to be considered when making changes. If we are not successful in our grant application, a reorganization of traditional staffing and stations will have to be considered. A comprehensive management study would be invaluable.

Building Safety Reorganization – While the Building Safety reorganization is underway, it needs to be supported into the future to insure a streamlined permitting and inspection program is sustained. This includes support in technology, cooperation between departments, a commitment to make the needed improvements, and staffed to an appropriate level to meet the demands of the work load.

Comprehensive Management Study – With limited resources, expanding standards, and public expectations, a comprehensive management study is needed as part of short and long term planning for the department. It will provide a non-political look into many of the issues mentioned in this analysis. Similar studies have been conducted in St. Paul and St. Cloud. The organizations that do the reports are nationally recognized for their work.

Inadequate Support Staff – The fire department does not have enough supervisory staff to be proactive. The department is managed with a fire chief and deputy fire chief with the additional responsibility of Building Safety and Emergency Management. This leaves little time for planning, new initiatives, and employee mentoring. We tend to deal with the current problem with little time to effectively manage into the future.

Expanding training requirement with limited time and resources – With a young workforce, training has become a significant issue. This combined with government unfunded training mandates, has stressed a limited training budget as well as staff time to conduct training.

Combination of Fire Prevention and Building Safety – Part of the Building Safety reorganization plan is to consider the efficiency of combining the Building Safety and Fire Prevention Division. The two division share similar missions and model codes. By combining resources of both divisions it is hoped that efficiencies in permitting and code enforcement will result.

Rental Housing License Reform – The current Rental Housing Program was designed for a larger staff and one-half the current work load. We are currently in the process of reviewing the wide variety of programs and ordinances used in other communities. Our goal is to redesign a rental housing program that matches the resources available to effectively run the program. This is another goal of the Building Safety re-organization.

Policy/Budget

Update of Standard Operating Guidelines (SOG) – An upgrade of the Standard Operating Guidelines is needed. While policy updates have been done over the years, time restrictions have dragged the process out too long with over 50% the project remaining. With many new employees, it is important to get this work done ASAP. The current SOG's were put in place over 20 years ago.

General Operating Cost – The “Other Expense” budget line, commonly known as our general operations budget, is so limited that any unexpected expenses require us put off maintenance or replacement of worn out equipment. Due to the nature of our budgeting, we have two choices: Cut other expenses or reduce staff.

Addressing Condemned Buildings –The city's budget for condemned buildings has been under funded for years. In the 2008 budget, I increased the demolition line and I will request additional increases in future years. However, the volume of condemned building continues to grow. Vacant and condemned buildings tend to spread blight through neighborhoods having a negative impact on quality of life

Support of City-Wide Needs Assessment – For too long the city has made repairs to buildings without any long term plan, ongoing maintenance plan, or priority list. Thus we have ended up with many city buildings in need of major work. The assessment will also address the city's inventory of buildings and possible downsizing where possible.

Civil Service System – The Civil Service System is dysfunctional. Civil service reform is needed to eliminate the long delays in our hiring process and provide the employer with the tools to hire the best candidate for the position. The Fire Department is forced to pay thousands of dollars in overtime waiting for the civil service process to crawl along. A three month hiring process is unacceptable.

Employee Development – Over the last several decades, employee development has been significantly reduced. The limited training provided is usually related to maintaining certifications and/or licenses. The lack of employee development was tolerable partially due to the experienced workforce. In the last two years, the city has seen unprecedented retirements. With these retirements, years of knowledge, experience, and training has left the city. Filling the vacancies with qualified employees has been challenging. With employees being expected to do more with less, employee development must be given a priority.

Public

Public expectations of improvement in building permit process – With the recent re-organization of Building Safety, businesses, development professionals, and contractors have high expectations. We have designed an open process to meet these expectations. We are assessing the role of stakeholders in the reorganization process. The changes need to be measurable and the public needs to be made aware of the improvements.

Expansion in public interaction and participation in community events – Fire Stations are located throughout the city and are a vital part of neighborhoods. Firefighters participate in community functions such as safety fairs, picnics, and an occasional parade. The fire fighters role in the community needs to be expanded to attend community club meetings, neighborhood planning meetings, community safety functions, and other events concerning issues in the neighborhoods.

Expansion of fire fighters role in quality of life issues. – There are many ordinances that concern quality of life issues in the city. These issues are enforced by different departments with little thought to coordination of efforts. A recent pilot project has created a team of Police, Fire, and Building Safety employees to bring a unified approach to ordinance enforcement. Expansion of the program city-wide is being evaluated while an incremental phase-in of combined enforcement is being done in targeted neighborhoods.

As part of the Building Safety re-organization, ordinances will be updated to allow the Fire Chief more flexibility for enforcement and who can provide needed enforcement. Fire fighters involvement in non-traditional community problems will improve the quality of life issues in the community and increase the productivity of the fire department.

Additional Questions

In your opinion, what is the City of Duluth's most important goal for the next 12 to 18 months? How will your department contribute to the achievement of that goal?

I believe the most pressing goal for the next 12 to 18 months is to change the anti-development/growth image of Duluth. As a community, we have been resistant to change to the point that it has impacted our ability to grow and be a thriving community. Once Duluth embraces change, the City's issues concerning budget, services, and accountability will become more manageable.

Public safety is essential for a healthy growth orientated community. I believe the fire department can promote development by providing excellent services. The recent reorganization plan for Building Safety will have a major impact on development and growth in the city. A streamlined customer service friendly process will encourage development as well as bring in income.

What obstacles do you face that stand in the way of being more effective? What one of two things could the mayor and CAO do that would help you improve the effectiveness of your department? What could be done to improve collaboration among the departments?

The two most significant obstacles toward a more efficient fire department are the lack of supervisory staff and NFPA 1710 compliance. With only two supervisors in the department, new initiatives, short and long term planning, and employee development have become very difficult. Managers are forced to operate in near crisis management mode. NFPA 1710 staffing has and will continue to be a challenge. We have taken steps to address a portion of NFPA 1710 through the Federal SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) grant. Other 1710 issues, such as response times, will need to be considered in our long and short term planning.

The Mayor's and CAO's support of a comprehensive management study for the fire department would address issues such as the need for an additional supervisors, NFPA 1710 staffing, and expanding EMS services to add transport. The study would be used as a long term planning tool to provide the department with a structured process for improvement. It removes local bias and local politics from an assessment process.

What is the public perception of your departments operations? What actions can be taken to improve public perceptions about the services provided within your department and division?

The Duluth Fire Department has a reputation of good service and professionalism. This reputation can be enhanced upon by being more interactive with community groups, civic organizations, and businesses. In addition, expanding services concerning quality of life issues will increase the value of the fire department service.

The Building Safety Division's public perception is quite different. The perception of the division varies greatly. As a rule design professionals tend to support the division and the divisions work. General contractors and the public tend to see the division as an obstruction to development. The current reorganization is designed to improve process and make the division innovative, accountable, and provide better service.

What types of training and development activities would be beneficial to employees (including you and your managers) within your department?

As you read above, employee development is needed to provide employees the tools they need to be effective. I believe training in city policies, government process, and customer service should be done first. Once the basics are done, there should be cross training in positions to help in the continuity of operations.

A formalized management training program is needed for current supervisors as well as employees that will be in leadership roles in the future. This is important for the fire department. Within five years most, if not all, senior staff will retire.

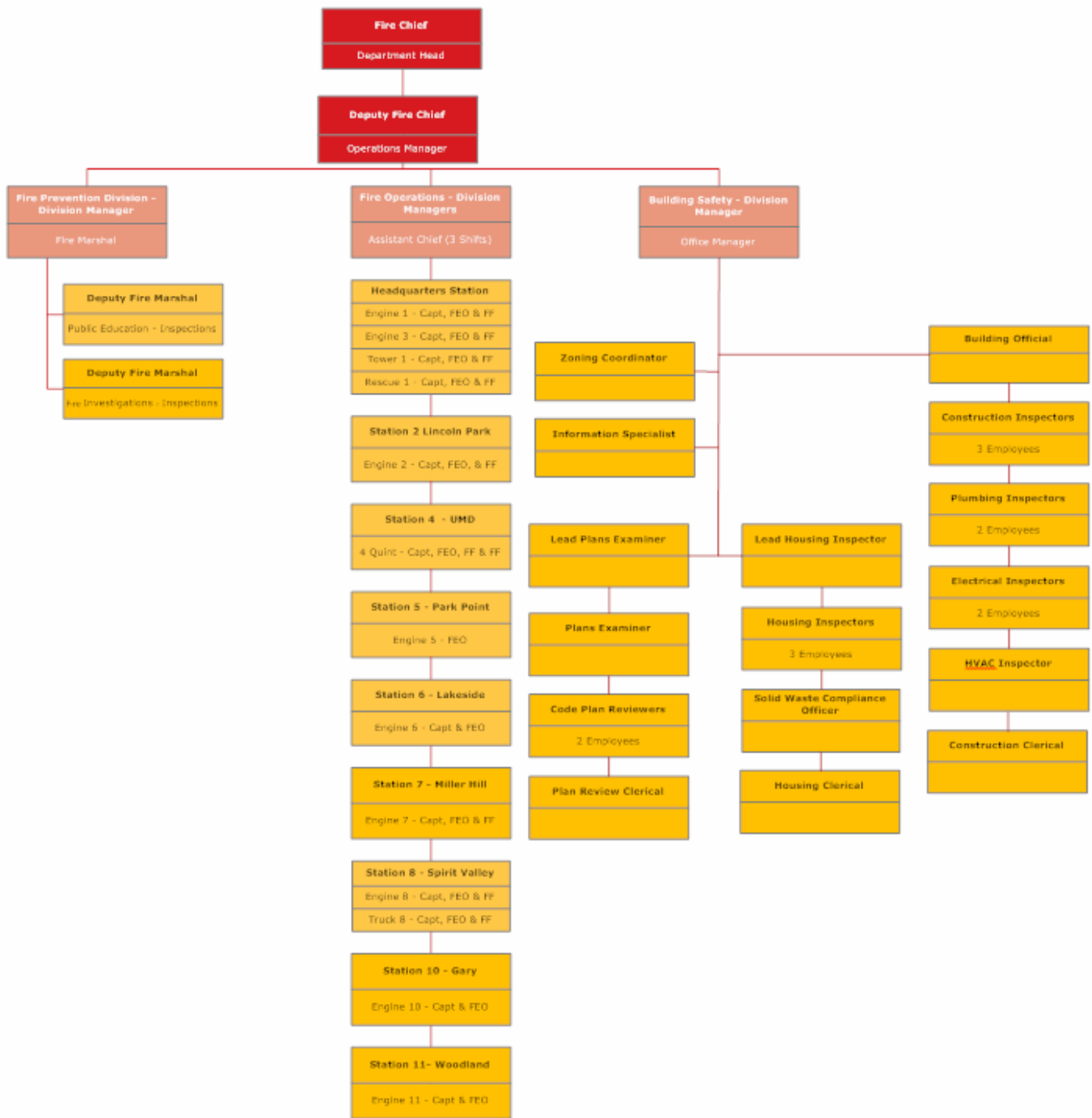
Describe the process by which you came up with this report – who was involved?

The process used in the creation of this report was to gather input from division managers, lead workers and key staff. Due to the volume of information provided, I had to prioritize what could be included in the report. In Building Safety, consultant Robert Copper facilitated a meeting to collect information for the SWOT. This not only provided valuable information, but also was an opportunity to observe key employees in a group exercise.

The same employees provided input on the most pressing issues for the department. While the SWOTs were done by division, many shared the same strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The process was a good tool to address both today's and future issues.

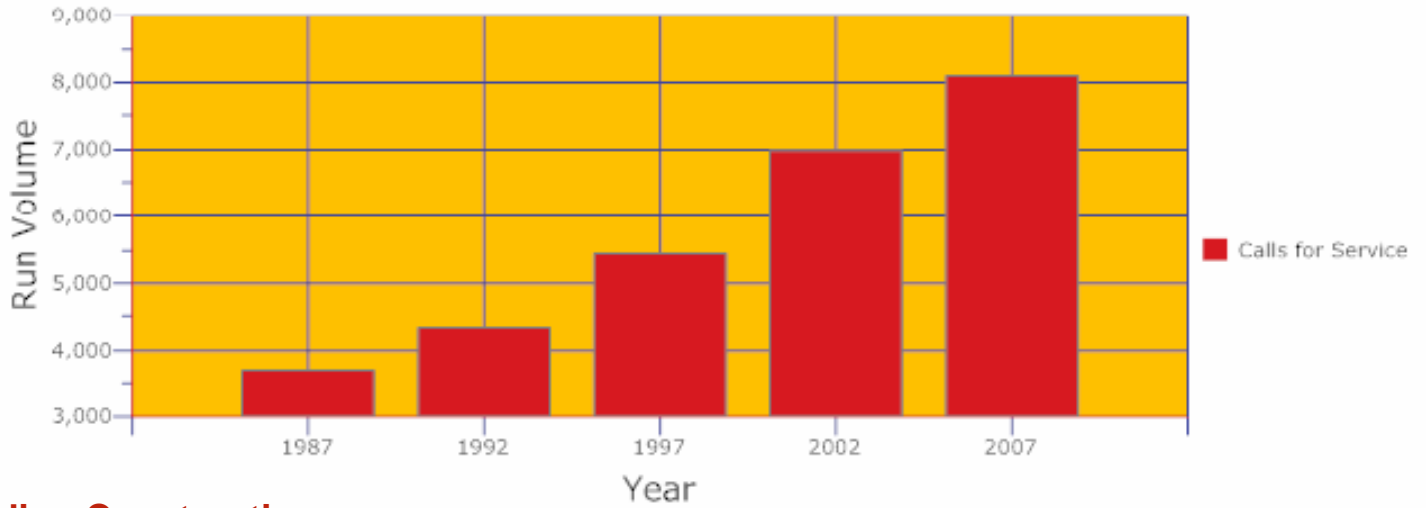
This process was a good first step to identify the issues and improvements in the department. Understanding that there are limited resources, ideas will be prioritized into a multi-year plan.

Organizational Chart

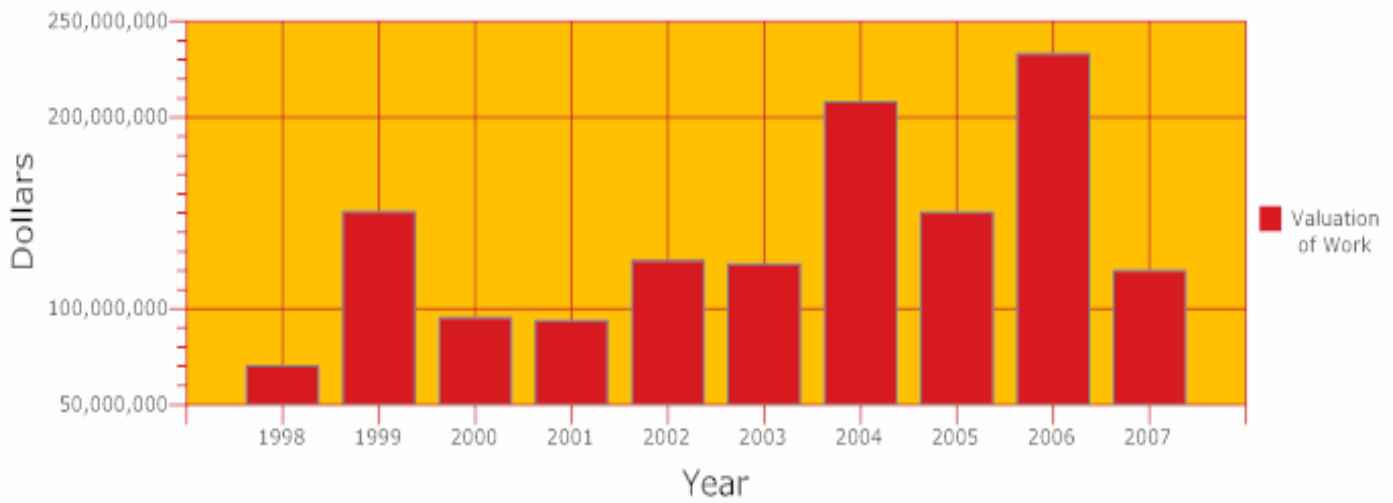


Statistics at a Glance

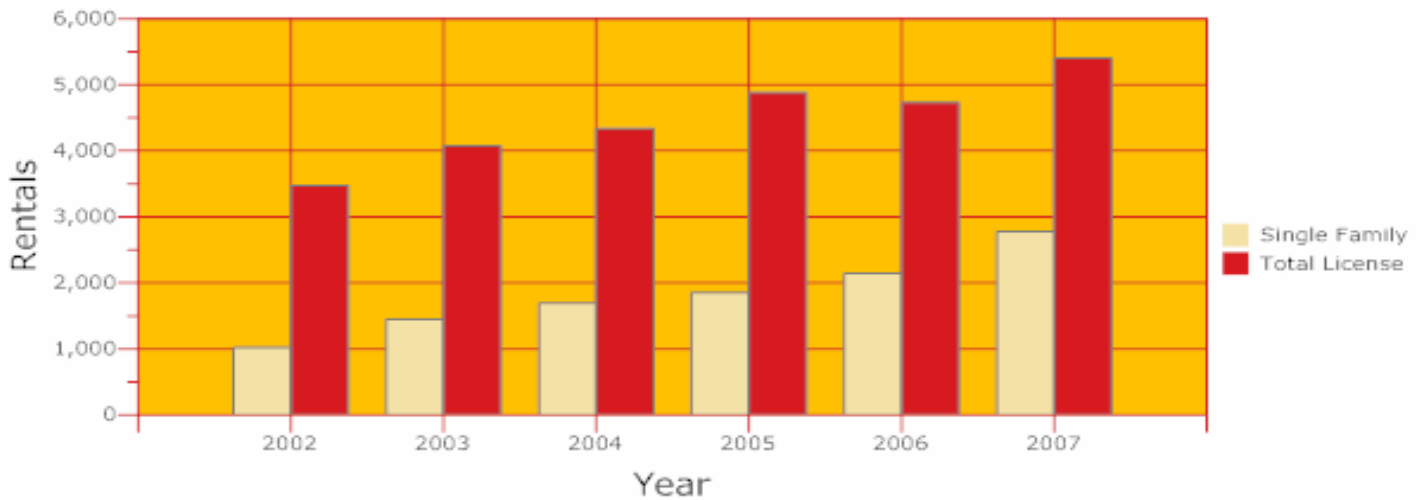
Fire Department Incidents



Building Construction



Rental Housing Licenses





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