



Councilmember Phil Mendelson's

At-Large Update

**Councilmember
Phil Mendelson
(At-Large)**

November 20, 2009

Fire Department Woes Continue Despite Multiple Warnings

On July 29, 2009 the home of Peggy Cooper Cafritz was destroyed by fire. The subsequent *Washington Post* article (headlined "Water Pressure During NW Fire Hampered Aid") began: "District firefighters battling the blaze that gutted an upper Northwest mansion Wednesday night had grave difficulties finding enough water to douse the flames, despite promises from city officials two years ago that the water problems that had plagued them at previous fires would be fixed."

Fire protection is one of the most critical services a government provides its citizens. To learn that the fire department has problems obtaining water to fight fires is disturbing, to say the least.

But water supply is a new issue. It was not raised in connection with District fires until the Georgetown Library fire in 2007. This begs the question: did something happen in recent years to reduce the supply of water? I think not. Indeed, the only systemic changes regarding water supply have been positive: fewer fire hydrants are inoperable, and more information about fire hydrants is available, and available electronically, to fire fighters in the field.

The Fire and EMS Department (which I will call FEMS) was quick to point out after the Cafritz fire that they did not have enough water for almost an hour. Yet at a Council hearing held in September, when Chief Rubin was asked whether there had been enough water to fight the fire. He responded: "I know you're looking for a 'yes' or 'no,' but I don't have one...That's, of course, the \$64,000 question."

Well, the answer is yes. Yes there was enough water to fight the fire. Not only is something wrong that the fire department did not know this on July 29th, but there is something wrong when the command staff doesn't know the answer two

months later. Department leaders must take the issue more seriously.

FEMS has testified that it needed an estimated 1,600 gallons per minute (gpm) water flow to fight the Cafritz fire. In fact, there was over 3,800 gpm available from four hydrants on or just off of nearby Loughboro Road. The fire command staff simply did not understand this water availability.

Instead, within the first 15-20 minutes of arrival, FEMS accessed four hydrants on the same water main serving Chain Bridge Road. This made some sense for the very first responders. But veteran firefighters know that one cannot tap multiple fire hydrants on the same water main without losing pressure - and lost pressure they did.

Then the fire command decided to look for large water mains, which took them 8 or 9 tenths of a mile downhill to MacArthur Boulevard where they tapped two hydrants. The change in elevation was so substantial as to complicate delivery of the water to the fire ground.

Common sense would suggest that the better place to access hydrants on different, closer, and possibly larger water mains would be 900 - 1800 feet away on Loughboro Road (an arterial street) or adjacent side streets - all at roughly the same elevation - rather than about 4,000 feet away on MacArthur Boulevard, a significantly lower elevation.

At best, it seems FEMS personnel were confused, sucking dry the closest hydrants, bypassing good hydrants not too far away, and expending precious resources accessing hydrants almost a mile distant. Shouldn't there have been one person designated to look at the water system map and better assign the 26 engines and 4 water supply pumpers on the scene? Isn't that common sense?

See Fire Woes, p2

Constituent Services Corner

A Southeast man came to Councilmember Mendelson's office requesting immediate help for his friend who was suffering from a broken hip and other ailments resulting from chronic illness. The friend desperately needed nursing care during the evenings in order to ensure her safety in her own home. Further, we were told that the friend had enough disability health care credits to be eligible for this necessary service at no charge.

Our office quickly contacted the Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF) and requested an immediate recalculation of the constituent's disability credits. It was found that the constituent could indeed receive the evening nursing care she so desperately needed.

When it seems like the District bureaucracy is engaging in some fuzzy math, call Councilmember Mendelson's office. We've got staff to make sure that $1 + 1 = 2$ for you.

Fire Woes (cont.)

But at another Council hearing we learned from Chief Rubin, unapologetically, that FEMS command staff did not bother to consult a water system map during the Cafritz fire, and that the map they did have was “several years old ... so the information is hardly useful.” I’d like to know what about the water main under Chain Bridge Road has changed in the last 75 years to make the system map “hardly useful”?

There are certain facts about the Chain Bridge Road fire that are eerily similar to an October 1, 2007 fire on Adams Mill Road, NW. After that incident, FEMS criticized the lack of water. The first responders had hooked up to multiple hydrants on the same water main, which became useless as a result. Then FEMS stretched hoses some 2,500 feet across the Calvert Street Bridge to Connecticut Avenue. After the fire it was realized that over 4,000 gpm was available from several hydrants less than 700 feet in the opposite direction.

Why is history repeating itself? A 2007 report on the Adams Mill Road fire stressed the importance of system maps for fire fighting. On December 3, 2007 WASA delivered to FEMS a hard copy set of maps, along with a CD of the maps. One year later (11/14/08) WASA testified before my committee, in the presence of Fire Chief Rubin, that “We [WASA] reviewed the current system maps and map books with Fire and EMS to ensure they have the most up-to-date documents.” But at the September 2009 hearing, Chief Rubin stated he Couldn’t use the CD and didn’t have the maps. It was apparent that FEMS had done nothing about water system maps for 20 months.

Along with maps there must be training. WASA reports that it has repeatedly offered to train Battalion Chiefs and others to read the maps and understand the water system. FEMS failed to respond for two years following the Adams Mill Road fire, although finally it has begun this month.

A fire fighter wrote after the Cafritz fire to suggest that problems with the fire were more about fire ground management than water:

“We were making headway until we were pulled out. The fire ground leadership (Incident Command) during this fire through their poor decisions and poor fire ground tactics created the mess that became that fire. Was the water supply an issue, Yes, however, with good leadership, sound tactics, and a coordinated fire attack that fire could have been extinguished before it became a total loss. The infighting that went on at the Chief’s level on the fire ground was disgusting to see from a line firefighter’s perspective.”

We need to be clear in this discussion that any issues regarding the July 29th fire lie not with WASA and the water supply system. Instead, I believe, FEMS is using the infrastructure issue as a smokescreen for the real problem – poor leadership. Common sense and, I assume, basic firefighting tactics, tell me three things about water supply in a fire: (1) go uphill; (2) go to the closest cross-street; and (3) don’t tap the same water main too many times. Each of those basic rules of thumb were violated in this case – and that has little or nothing to do with our aging infrastructure.



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Phil Garners More Awards for Service

Last month, Phil was recognized by the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, as well as Legal Times for his work on LGBT and human rights issues.

Earlier in October, Phil was the recipient of the “Visionary Award” by the National Law Journal/Legal Times for his extensive work in expanding the rights and responsibilities of the District’s LGBT community.

Late in October, Phil received the “Justice Award” from the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club. The club cited Phil’s authoring sweeping domestic partnership laws, the statute that allows same-sex marriage recognition from other jurisdictions, and shepherding marriage equality legislation through the Council.

Upcoming Hearings of the Judiciary Committee

November 20th at 10:00am, Rm. 500
Public Oversight Hearing on “Hate Crimes in the District of Columbia and Police Response to Reports of Hate Crimes.”

November 23rd at 11:00am, Rm. 123
Public Hearing on Bills 18-426, the “Uniform Interstate Depositions and Discovery Act of 2009,” and 18-427, the “Uniform Unsworn Foreign Declarations Act of 2009.”

December 11th at 12:00om, Rm. 412
Public Hearing on P.R.’s 18-506, the “District of Columbia Homeland Security Commission Cathy Lanier Confirmation Resolution of 2009” and 18-507, the District of Columbia Homeland Security Commission Dennis Rubin Confirmation Resolution of 2009.”