

Plan Boosts Emergency Services

Upcounty Areas in Need Of Significant Upgrade

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Montgomery County fire and rescue officials are pushing for construction of more fire stations and the purchase of equipment for the fast-growing upcounty area as top priorities in an emergency-services blueprint for the next decade.

The document proposes revisions in allocating equipment to improve response times on emergency calls as well as guidelines for handling a large-scale disaster.

"They needed to be there yesterday," County Council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty) said of more fire stations in the area. "We got to get them done as soon as we can."

The proposal is a revision of a plan adopted in 1995 and reflects the reconfiguration of the county's fire and rescue services. The County Council consolidated control of the department under a single fire chief in May 2004. Previously, authority was shared by a career fire chief, a civilian fire administrator and 19 volunteer chiefs. Some volunteers resisted the change, saying it would reduce their autonomy and discourage people from volunteering as firefighters.

Fire and rescue officials included more than 100 recommendations, including construction of a health facility for emergency workers. One of the key proposals focused on recruitment, said Scott Gutschick, senior planning specialist with the Fire and Rescue Service.

The proposals are now under review by the council's Public Safety Committee and will go to the full council for action this fall. Knapp, a member of the committee, said officials will need to weigh financial factors and competition from other county programs when they decide how to fund the plan.

Under the plan, a fire station in West Germantown is scheduled to be completed in fiscal year 2007. Two stations are slated to open in fiscal year 2008: the Germantown East station and the Travilah station, which would be in Rockville on the grounds of the public safety training academy.

The council also is working to quickly set up an interim station in Clarksburg until a permanent station can be constructed by fiscal year 2009. Officials also are planning for a new station in the Shady Grove area.

Upcounty residents say their communities have needed these facilities for years.

The emergency staff presence upcounty is "needed sooner rather than later," said

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David Sapoznick, president of the Germantown Citizens Association. "I think we get good service, just not enough people to do the job properly. That's the big problem."

There are 33 fire and rescue sta-

tions in the county, including eight in the upcounty area.

The plan also calls for more staff and vehicles to handle emergency calls, which represent about 75 percent of all calls to county fire and rescue, Sapoznick said. Some emergency units, according to the

proposal, are exceeding a recommended workload of 2,500 calls per year.

Officials also recommended establishing a central health facility for fire and rescue workers' needs — a "one-stop shop" that would

take care of physical exams, therapy and counseling for constantly strained first-response workers such as firefighters, said Richard Bowers, the wellness, safety and training division chief for the the Fire and Rescue Service.

At a hearing on Monday, Public Safety Committee members discussed the need for such a facility.

"The community wants this," Bowers said.

"They want people that can serve them at their peak."