

**FIRE COMMISSION**  
**(August 15, 2002)**

**Organization and Responsibilities:**

The Fire Commission was established pursuant to an amendment to the County Charter adopted in 2000. The nine members, each representing a district, are appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the Council, and may be removed upon the Mayor's recommendation and the Council's approval. The commissioners serve staggered five-year terms, and each may serve no more than five years, except that those initially appointed to one and two-years terms may serve an additional five years. Although unpaid, the commissioners may receive compensation for expenses, and, if not paid by their employers while performing commission work, are paid by the county at their hourly rate, but no more than five times the state's minimum wage for actual work hours lost.

The commission is empowered in its sole discretion to appoint and remove the Fire Chief, except that a motion for removal must contain a statement of reasons, of which the chief must be allowed to respond.

The commission is also empowered to:

- a) Adopt rules for the conduct of its business and for the review of Fire Department administration;
- b) Review the department's annual budget and make recommendations thereon to the Mayor, Managing Director, and Council;
- c) Review department operations to recommend improvements to the chief;
- d) Evaluate, at least annually, the chief's performance and report to the Mayor, Managing Director, and Council;
- e) Review personnel actions for conformance with department policies as enumerated in the charter;
- f) Hear citizen complaints concerning the department or its personnel, and make recommendations to the chief on appropriate corrective actions if necessary;
- g) Submit an annual report to the Mayor, Managing Director, and Council on its activities.

**Findings**

Following its review of documents, including the relevant charter provisions (Article VII, Chapter 4, Section 7) organization chart, and statement of responsibilities, and after hearing the testimony of the vice chair of the commission and the Corporation Counsel, the Cost of Government Commission finds:

1. The Fire Commission, which meets monthly and borrows a secretary from the Corporation Counsel's office, has, in the short time since its establishment, adopted rules necessary for its efficient operation and is otherwise effectively and economically fulfilling its statutory responsibilities.
2. Actual Fire Commission expenditures during 2001-2002, and planned for 2002-2003, are de minimus, consisting primarily of reimbursements for commissioners' expenses for travel to commission meetings.
3. The Fire Commission perceives that department personnel are pleased with the commission's operations, and that morale is generally good.
4. Fire fighting or emergency medical service experience is not a prerequisite, and, may not be desirable for appointment to the commission.
5. The charter provisions governing the Fire Commission's composition, authority, and operations are, in all material respects, identical to those of the Police Commission.

### **Recommendations**

Having considered and reviewed the documents and testimony provided by the Fire Commission and Corporation Counsel, the Cost of Government Commission recommends as follows:

1. The Mayor and County Council should prepare and recommend to the voters a charter amendment that combines the Fire Commission and Police Commission into one, nine-member "Public Safety Commission," with the authorities and responsibilities now delegated to the Fire and Police Commissions.

*Rationale:* As earlier indicated, the charter provisions governing the Fire and Police Commissions are virtually identical, and fire and police experience are not prerequisites for commission membership. Although the Cost of Government Commission acknowledges that the Police Commission, unlike the Fire Commission, has focused on hearing and resolving citizen complaints, we believe that a single Public Safety Commission, meeting monthly, can effectively perform the required functions, thereby eliminating the redundant costs, little as they may be, of maintaining two commissions with similar duties.

2. The Mayor should consider appointing one member to the Public Safety Commission with fire protection experience (and one person with law enforcement experience).

*Rationale:* Although experience in fire protection (and law enforcement) is not a prerequisite for appointment to the fire (and police) commissions, the Cost of Government Commission believes that the practical experience can help the Public Safety Commission in its work. We acknowledge, however, that there are valid arguments against appointing commissioners with specific experience in the field, including a tendency to rely solely on past experience in making decisions. Nevertheless, we include the recommendation in the belief that the Mayor (and County Council) should be encouraged to consider such appointments.

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