

**INFORMATION SHEET:**  
**Article #14 - Annual Town Meeting Spring 2020**  
**Appropriation to Hire 8 New Firefighters**  
**5-1-2020**

**As printed in the Town Meeting Warrant Handbook:**

**ARTICLE 14:** To see if the Town will vote to appropriate a sum of money for the purpose of hiring eight (8) additional firefighters for Fiscal Year 2021 contingent upon voter approval of a proposition 2½ override ballot question. Or do or take any other action on the matter. On request of the Board of Selectmen.

**RECOMMENDATION (Finance Committee):** That the Town will vote to appropriate \$971,507 for the purpose of funding the salaries and benefits of 8 firefighters for Fiscal Year 2021 contingent upon voter approval of the passage of a proposition 2 ½ override ballot question under General Laws Chapter 59 Section 21C.

**Executive Summary:**

As context for this proposal to increase Fire Department staffing, it is helpful to understand three related changes to the Fire & Rescue Department staffing model that take effect on July 1, 2020:

- 1) The Town has committed to eliminating the practice of deploying engine and ladder trucks with only one firefighter/EMT/paramedic. For many years, the Department has commonly resorted to deploying engines and ladders from all 5 fire stations with only one firefighter due to staffing limits and activity levels.
- 2) The shift commander will have greater flexibility to determine when to call in additional personnel during the middle of a shift as needed in response to particular incidents.
- 3) The minimum number of firefighters at the start of shift will increase from 10 to 14.

Adding 8 positions to the budget will result in two additional positions for each 24-hour shift once the positions are filled and the new hires have completed fire academy training, a process which takes 8–12 months. These added positions will enable the Fire Department to increase start of shift staffing from 14 to 16 per shift and facilitate adherence to the 2-firefighter per engine/ladder minimum while continuing to operate all five existing fire stations until completion of a new fire station. It should be noted that, although firefighters are assigned to a particular station at the start of each shift, the allocation of available Department personnel is determined by the Chief, and managed by the shift commander on an hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute basis based on the number of personnel available and where the personnel are most needed at any given moment. For example, it is not unusual for firefighters assigned to Headquarters to respond to a call in East Falmouth. As such, increasing the number of firefighter/EMTs/paramedics on duty for each shift improves response times for the entire Town.

The tax impact of the proposed override would be 8 cents on the tax rate. The increase in the tax bill for a home with a median assessed value of \$378,000 would be \$30.24 per year.

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**Overview of Fire Department Staffing Changes**

- 7 Positions added over past 5 years.
- 2 Additional Positions proposed within FY2021 Operating Budget, which do NOT require a Proposition 2 ½ Override.
- 8 Additional Positions proposed under Town Meeting Article #14; funding for these positions does require approval of a Proposition 2 ½ Override.

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**1. How many Firefighters does the Town have now?**

The table below reflects a steady increase in the number of Fire Department budgeted positions in recent years. All firefighters, lieutenants and captains respond to both fire calls and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) calls and are required to hold at least an EMT certification. Most personnel hold the more advanced paramedic certification which is required to perform Advanced Life Support.

	<b>Budgeted Positions</b>				
	<b>FY2016</b>	<b>FY2017</b>	<b>FY2018</b>	<b>FY2019</b>	<b>FY2020</b>
Firefighters	49	50	51	54	56
Lieutenants	4	4	4	4	4
Captains	4	4	4	4	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>64</b>

*Note: Above counts do not include Chief, Deputy Chiefs, Inspectors or administrative staff who do not routinely respond to calls.*

**2. How many budgeted positions will the Town have in FY2021?**

FY2020 Approved Positions	64
FY2021 Proposed New Positions Funded Within Budget - No Override Required	2
FY2021 Proposed New Positions Under Article #14 - Override Required	8
<b>FY2021 TOTAL</b> assuming all proposed positions approved	<b>74</b>

**3. Why are so many new positions needed at this time?**

The need for these positions is driven by two factors.

- a. The number of calls has increased steadily for many years. Recent Fire Department staff increases have helped but are still not sufficient to meet current needs. Total Fire

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Department calls have increased from 4,217 in 1999 to 8,159 in 2019.

- b. The 10 added positions for FY2021 are needed to implement the new 2-Firefighter per engine/ladder minimum in a manner which does not cause a significant increase in response times for any area of Town. The department has historically relied on an obsolete practice of sending one Firefighter in an engine or ladder to respond to fire and EMS calls when there were not enough personnel on duty to send two. The Town has added 7 positions in the last five years to improve service levels within available budget constraints. Even with these 7 added positions, there are not enough Fire Department personnel to eliminate the one-firefighter response without compromising response times. Deploying one Firefighter to a call does not provide for an effective response to protect public safety. A minimum of two firefighter/EMTs are required to staff a Basic Life Support ambulance in Massachusetts. Further, deploying one Firefighter compromises the safety of our first responders. Beginning July 1, 2020 the Town has committed to ending this practice. The decision to eliminate the one Firefighter response is driven by public safety concerns and is also codified in the union contract.

**4. How will these new positions improve services?**

The 8 additional positions included in Article #14 will allow the Fire Department to increase the start of shift minimum staffing from 14 Firefighters to 16 Firefighters. These positions, in combination with the positions added over the last five years without an override, will make possible a dramatic improvement in staffing levels which in turn will improve effective response times. As recently as FY2018, the Department operated with a 10 Firefighter start of shift minimum. The added staff will improve the effectiveness of Fire Department responses throughout the entire town, significantly enhancing public safety.

**5. How long does it take to hire and train a new Firefighter?**

Under typical circumstances, it takes 8 – 12 months from budget approval to hire and train a new Firefighter. Presently, the Fire Academy has been shut down due to Covid-19 so this timeline may be longer. As of the printing of this document, we do not have a confirmed date for Town Meeting and we cannot predict the date that these new personnel will be able to cover shifts.

**6. Why, if the vast majority of calls are for ambulances, do we need more Firefighters or would EMTs or Paramedics be the better choice?**

Every Falmouth Firefighter, Lieutenant and Captain is also an EMT or paramedic and all respond to both fire and medical calls. This dual training is the most cost effective way to provide fire and medical response service to the community and it is the standard model throughout the Commonwealth.

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**7. What are the national and/or state safety standards for response times? And how does Falmouth compare?**

Our effective response times are going to improve with an increase in staffing at the start of shift from a minimum of 10 before FY2019 to a minimum of 14 beginning FY2021. There is no national response time requirement. There are two sets of National Fire Protection Association “standards” which are guidelines only: one for areas served by professional firefighter/EMT/paramedics such as Falmouth; and another for those served by volunteers.

The NFPA “standard” (guideline) calls for arrival on the scene within 6 minutes. Most municipalities do not meet this standard. Falmouth’s average response time for calendar 2019 was 7.9 minutes which is comparable to the data found in a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (10/2017):

- Urban areas average EMS response time 7 minutes
- Suburban average EMS response time 7.7 minutes
- Rural average EMS response time 14.5 minutes

**8. What is the current thinking on applying for a SAFER Grant? Is it dependent or independent of the FY2021 budget?**

The SAFER grant is not a good solution for adding 8 firefighter/EMT/Paramedics in a community bound by the limitations of proposition 2 ½. The SAFER grant provides only 75% reimbursement for two years, then 35% for the third year, then zero reimbursement. The problem is Falmouth cannot absorb the wages and benefits of 8 additional positions in the third and fourth years without either an override or significant reductions to other departments. If we accept a SAFER grant, then fail to pass an override three years later, we will be faced with the unacceptable choices of laying off firefighters or eliminating positions in other departments.

**9. Can the Town afford to hire 8 new firefighters given the economic uncertainties presented by the Coronavirus pandemic?**

Hiring 8 new firefighters as proposed in Article #14 is conditioned on approval of an override of Prop. 2 ½ to fund the full cost of the additional firefighters. The override provides a reliable revenue source – additional real estate taxes. Whether taxpayers approve the override is a question to be decided by the voters.

**10. What is the cost to the owner of a typical single-family homeowner if Article #14 and the associated Proposition 2 ½ override are approved?**

The tax impact of the proposed override would be 8 cents on the tax rate. The increase in the tax bill for a home with a median assessed value of \$378,000 would be \$30.24 per year.

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**11. What is the breakout of wages and benefits included in the \$971,507 cost to hire 8 Additional Firefighters?**

Yearly Salary		63,470
Retirement Assessment		16,710
Holiday pay		3,121
Medicare 1.45%		920
Health Ins (Family Plan)		20,000
Educational Incentive (Associates Degree)		1,000
LOD/111F Insurance		678
Life Ins		9
Uniform		1,680
Protective Gear		3,350
Fire Academy		9,910
Staff Development (Test and Textbooks)		590
<b>Total Cost</b>		<b>121,438</b>

The chart shows the initial total cost to hire a single firefighter/EMT/paramedic. Not all the costs are annual but there is future training and protective gear replacement that should be considered. Staff development is ongoing while textbooks would be a one-time cost.

**12. Is it possible to use temporary workers and/or interns to fill the staffing gaps while the permanent fire/rescue staffing is brought up to what is deemed necessary over several years?**

No. In order to maintain safety standards, employees of the Falmouth FD need to be fire academy trained, fully qualified, and medically certified. In order to enroll in the Massachusetts Fire Academy, one needs to be a full-time employee of a MA fire department.

**13. Is it feasible to have 10 recruits for the Falmouth Fire Department be trained concurrently at the fire academy?**

Under normal circumstances, it is reasonable to anticipate 10 recruits can be placed in fire academy training such that they will be trained within 8 – 12 months. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the fire academy completion may be delayed.

**14. Could the Town contract with a private ambulance company and locate them in the West Falmouth Station area of operation? Is there a cost estimate for this option?**

A preliminary investigation indicates this is not a viable option.