

From Windsor Avenue to Potomac Yard

Fire Suppression Services to move

by David Fromm

In the summer of 2006, a task force was formed to study a proposal to build a new fire station in Potomac Yard. It would be a modern state-of-the-art facility with four stories of affordable housing constructed on top. The proposal also included moving the fire suppression services from Windsor Avenue Station 202. In general, Del Ray residents supported the building of the new fire station. Many opposed the loss of the fire suppression services. The DRCA argued that the new station was a land use issue that we supported, but that moving the services was a budget consideration – a decision which should receive the full benefit of a comprehensive evaluation of the *System* (Fire Suppression, EMS, Hazmat, Emergency Preparedness, staffing levels and living quarters) and conditions under which the *System's* components must operate. At the public meeting of October 14, 2006, City Council agreed, approving the new station and stating that any decisions about the distribution of fire and EMS services would come after careful study and consideration.

It is now June 2009, the new station is almost ready to open, and it is required to be staffed. During the budget meetings this spring, Fire Chief Thiel presented a comprehensive evaluation of the *System*.

The report is sobering. To address the challenges posed by Alexandria's dense urban environment and meet national standards for minimal safe staffing levels, ideally 52 firefighter positions need to be filled, costing \$5.9 million per year. Many existing stations need renovation or replacement, costing as much as \$65 million over the next 30 years. Additionally, the EMS services need to be expanded and a new fire station is needed for Eisenhower Valley, which currently has none. For personnel, the outcome of the budget hearings is funding for four 911 communications staff, one EMS administrator, and three firefighters (using a federal matching grant).

The primary reason so many positions need to be filled to meet the national standards is that Alexandria has been using three person firefighting teams when the standard is four. In 2006, much was made of response time coverage. With the Windsor Avenue Station, the response time from the station for Del Ray is very good. But that assumes the engine is in the station, when in fact, with an average of 50 calls for service per day in Alexandria, it probably is not. Also, Chief Thiel argues that a short response time is not of much use if you do not have enough people there to fight the fire. Therefore the addition of any new firefighting personnel will be used to create four person teams.

Consequently, the decision has been made to move the fire suppression services from Windsor Avenue Station 202 to Potomac Yard Station 209. This will occur sometime in late August to early September. With the completion of the refurbishing of the Windsor Avenue Station, the EMS services will remain there for the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately, Chief Thiel cannot attend our June meeting since he is previously committed to attending another community event. Sometime during the summer, we plan on having a meeting with him so he can answer any questions the membership may have.

(For some of the history see DRCA newsletters from September to November 2006 on the website. For the comprehensive evaluation of the *System* go to www.alexandriava.gov/fire/default.aspx?id=21316.)