

OPINION

Opinion: Highlands residents demand to be heard after fire safety cuts put them at risk

Mike Gramig, Opinion contributor Published 6:36 a.m. ET Dec. 3, 2019

There has been a significant decrease in public safety protection for the residents of the Highlands. Fire and medical safety doesn't occupy much of the citizens of Louisville's attention most of the time. The elimination of Engine Company 11 at Rubel and Winter avenues has greatly increased the risk from fire and medical emergencies for those of us who live here.

The new Metro Louisville budget has required some belt-tightening this year. Many programs and departments have had to lose funding and cut services. As a former battalion and assistant fire chief dealing with the Division of Fire budget, I am very aware of the realities of funding public agencies.

Everyone must share in the burden of cuts. In the extreme environment of fire and life safety, we are trained to evaluate decisions — many times in seconds — and decide whether a risk is acceptable or not. The one remaining company at the station, Quint 7, is a multifunction truck with a single crew of four.

The problem with this deployment is that the company can only serve one of the two functions it is assigned — either as an engine company or as a ladder company — when it arrives at a fire. Furthermore, this company's elimination cuts the units in half that are available to respond to medical emergencies in the area.

Life safety incidents and fire incidents share an interesting characteristic: They are both very time critical, and the amount of time is about four minutes. In fire incidents, at four minutes, the fire spread increases dramatically.

In medical response, four minutes is the amount of time it takes for your brain to begin to die if it is deprived of oxygen. Four minutes response times by emergency responders is critical.

The decision to increase the emergency medical risk profile of the neighborhood by 50% and the fire and rescue risk by 33% by eliminating Engine 11 is unacceptable to the residents of the neighborhoods that it protected.

More budget coverage: [Louisville has a \\$4 million year-end surplus. Here's how Mayor Fischer wants to spend it \(/story/news/politics/metro-government/2019/11/14/louisville-budget-surplus-audit-fiscal-year-leads-4-million/4181612002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/metro-government/2019/11/14/louisville-budget-surplus-audit-fiscal-year-leads-4-million/4181612002/)

An example of how extreme the consequences of such decisions are occurred one week after the company was closed. On the night of Aug. 7, a call was received by 911 reporting a fire at the corner of Village and Dorothy in the Highlands.



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Fire companies arrived to find a three-story condominium complex on fire with multiple rescues of people from windows. This is one of the most extreme situations that firefighters face.

There are many actions that must be completed in the initial moments of such an incident. This takes more firefighters and companies on the scene to immediately execute rescues (multiple, by ladder,) search the building, attack the fire itself, ventilate the building to reduce the risk of smoke inhalation by residents and — for the firefighter EMTs and paramedics — treat multiple victims.

It is a desperate situation for the residents. One [resident died from smoke inhalation \(/story/news/local/2019/08/07/louisville-fire-kentucky-1-dead-after-highlands-apartment-fire/1941310001/\)](/story/news/local/2019/08/07/louisville-fire-kentucky-1-dead-after-highlands-apartment-fire/1941310001/) before firefighters could locate and remove him from this large multi-unit residence.

Highlands fire: [Bellarmine golf coach dies in apartment fire, Louisville authorities say \(/story/news/local/2019/08/07/louisville-fire-kentucky-1-dead-after-highlands-apartment-fire/1941310001/\)](/story/news/local/2019/08/07/louisville-fire-kentucky-1-dead-after-highlands-apartment-fire/1941310001/)

One week before this incident, one of the three first-alarm responding companies, Engine 11, was eliminated. This reduced the closest responding units and firefighters by one-third.

Instead of 12 firefighters, there were only eight to handle all of the fire tasks I pointed out above. Time is of the essence and is the most critical of the factors involved. Besides having one-third of the firefighters that the week before would have responded from this district, other companies from much farther and many more minutes away had to be called.

This is unacceptable not only for the residents of the Highlands, but for the rest of the Metro Urban Services District.

Such an important decision, it would seem, should be an issue fully debated in the public. This decision occurred without such a debate. In the original budget proposed, the engine company by the airport was scheduled to close.

That is a much lower residential density area and has a lower population exposed to fire risk than the Tyler Park, German-Paristown, Original Highlands, Shelby Park, Deer Park, Bonnycastle, Douglas Highlands, and Cherokee Triangle neighborhoods. It might have made its closing acceptable. Without announcing any change, the budget was passed, and lo and behold, Engine 11 was closed instead, without so much as a peep.

The residents of the Highlands demand that we be heard, and that these issues be aired in a proper forum to weigh the consequences of such a decision.

Mike Gramig is a retired Louisville battalion chief.