

## Roland Park fire station hit by cost-cutting closures

*Engine, truck repeatedly out of service*

By Larry Perl

Posted 1/03/10

More than 50 times since July, Baltimore City has ordered that at least one of the major vehicles at the Roland Park fire station be temporarily taken out of service or moved to another firehouse to save the city money, according to community leaders.

But they say the city never alerted the neighborhood it was doing so, and that it may be an unsafe practice.

The duration of each incident is increasing, said Philip Spevak, president of the Roland Park Civic League. Between July and early December, the vehicles were idled or moved for 14 hours at a time; in recent weeks it's been "days at a time," Spevak said.

The Roland Park fire station appears to be one of at least four in the city that have had equipment deliberately idled on a rotating basis, a practice called "closure," he said.

City Fire Chief James Clack and Stuart Nathan, one of the city's fire commissioners, will address the issue at the Roland Park Civic League meeting on Jan. 7, Spevak said.

"There should be communication as to why this is a good idea and why this is safe," he said.

He said he has also invited City Council members Mary Pat Clarke and Sharon Green Middleton, who represent the Roland Park area, to the meeting.

The Roland Park fire station is home to Engine No. 44 and Truck No. 25. More than twice a week on average, one or the other sits "unusable" in the station, or is used by another station, Spevak said.

The practice doesn't sit well with the civic league, which spent much of last year raising money to renovate the aging firehouse at Roland Avenue and Upland Road.

In the past year, Baltimore City has approved \$90,000 for renovations to the firehouse, the state legislature has committed \$110,000 in bond money to be spent this year, and the community has raised \$40,000 to \$50,000. The station now has new lockers; work is expected to start soon on renovation of the kitchen area, Spevak said.

"We've had much involvement with the fire department in the past year because of renovations, and nothing was said (about closures). It was certainly a surprise to us," Spevak said.

The periodic shutting of fire department units is not new. According to published reports, a fatal rowhouse fire Dec. 9 in west Baltimore led several City Council members and the city's former fire chief, William Goodwin, to chastise the fire department for closing five different fire company units on a rotating basis to save the city \$3 million.

Spevak said he knew of the closure practice, but which stations were involved weren't identified, he said. He said he was surprised to learn from residents and other "nonofficial" sources that Roland Park was one of the five.

The city didn't inform the civic league about the closures until last week when Spevak said he received

confirmation from fire commissioner Nathan that "Roland Park has been involved in the rotating closures."

In an "e-newsletter" to Roland Park residents this week Spevak wrote, "This past week, equipment was out of service for three days in a row. During these periods, this leaves Roland Park dependent on equipment coming from longer distances."

Spevak also wrote that because of a shortage of paramedic units citywide, "the Roland Park station is also required to participate in rotations months at a time to cover medical calls. This pulls the equipment and staff from (the station) off-site even more."

Spevak told the Baltimore Messenger the civic league is fact-finding at this point and he is not passing judgment yet.

But he did note that Roland Park is an older community and that many of its houses are made of wood.

And he noted that the community was the scene of a house fire that killed Matthew and Abigail Young in December 2007 and severely injured their father, Steve Young.

"We are strong supporters of the Roland Park fire station and the city," Spevak said. "It's certainly a legitimate concern by a community when fire equipment is being moved out or unused."

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