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**Sent:** Friday, May 30, 2025 9:58 AM

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**Subject:** Baltimore City Fire Department Budget Request

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President Cohen and members of the City Council,

Last night, the Baltimore City Fire Department's leadership team under Chief James Wallace presented their budget request to the Council.

I was honored to attend the hearing to demonstrate my support of the budget request as one of the city's civilian Fire Commissioners. My attendance at the hearing and this letter are

independent of the department. My purpose is to offer some observations on the department in general and certain highlighted expenditures.

Chief Wallace assumed command of the fire department during a difficult and tumultuous period. He and his team have performed in an exemplary fashion. He has steadied the ship and made tremendous strides forward in instituting measures to enhance both fire fighter and public safety.

The Baltimore City Fire Department has a long and storied history. Routinely the public ranks the fire department as one of the most important and revered agencies. The men and women who serve in its ranks are highly motivated and committed public servants. For a period, there was a leadership vacuum.

Mayor Scott made a wise choice by selecting Chief Wallace. Selecting an internal candidate for Fire Chief was necessary given the troubled times and disconnect between top headquarters staff and field personnel. Chief Wallace has done yeoman's work in bridging that divide.

From day one, the Chief began addressing the issue of filling vacancies in both suppression and EMS. There is both a regional and national problem with fire service recruitment. Baltimore is doing much better than most. The innovative and multi-faceted strategies to recruit are producing tangible results.

The most important component of firefighting and public safety is sufficient staffing. Adequate personnel must be deployed quickly to an incident to rescue victims, keep the fire from spreading and finally to extinguish the blaze. There also needs to be sufficient units and personnel in-service to respond to concurrent large-scale incidents.

Staffing is expensive, but essential. It is an expenditure that must be funded. There are only three options: fill vacancies, utilize overtime, or reduce services. The last option should be an anathema to us all. The response information presented to the Council very clearly demonstrates the need to maintain our current capabilities and, indeed, make enhancements.

The institution of the Battalion Technician Program which assigns a qualified officer to serve as an administrative and fire ground aide to the Battalion Chiefs has increased accountability and effectiveness in incident management. It is a program that should be made permanent.

Community outreach, a greater emphasis on community paramedicine and fire prevention has both saved lives and brought the fire service closer to the citizens it serves.

I applaud the Chief for leveraging outside federal assets to augment his budget allocations. Using funds from ARPA and other federal programs, the department has been able to replace

self-contained breathing apparatus, replace and upgrade hoses and other essential equipment, repair aging facilities and improve fire fighter/paramedic training.

The emphasis on identifying and marking vacant structures has and will continue to save lives and, hopefully, prevent future catastrophes like the Stricker Street fire.

At every Fire Board meeting command staff are constantly evaluating ways to improve and innovate. I applaud their vision and dedication.

It is often said that showing up is most of the battle. Chief Wallace responds to almost every multiple alarm and many working fires. For years, that simply was not done. His presence demonstrates to the troops his commitment and passion for his mission and the members under his command. He is there when a member is injured and is a source of solace and strength to the families of those members who make the ultimate sacrifice. I was very pleased that several council members recognized and lauded the Chief's leadership style at the hearing. The impact that his leadership and presence has on department personnel and morale are immeasurable.

Fire Fighting is an extremely dangerous job. Both the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the International Association of Fire Fighters advocate investing in annual physicals and screening for heart disease and cancer as a preventative tool to diagnose illnesses or genetic defects early which will save lives. Early detection will produce long-term savings in medical and workers compensation costs. Treating these types of medical issues early is more cost effective and produces better results. I realize that this issue is not before the Council. I raise it solely for informational purposes.

I will conclude by reiterating the professionalism and dedication of the department's members. Treat them fairly. Provide the equipment, training, and resources they need to fulfill their mission. Lastly, provide them with the salary and benefits they richly earn every day by risking their lives and protecting our city.

I have made my career as a fire fighter and union official on the state, local and national levels and, in later years, as an advocate/consultant. I have advised departments from FDNY to small townships who are dealing with a crisis or seek to improve their services.

Without any equivocation, our city is very well served by Chief Wallace and his staff and, more importantly, the men and women in harm's way who do their jobs everyday with compassion, professionalism, and courage.

I appreciate the opportunity to offer my views and encourage you individually and collectively to support the fire department's request.

Respectfully,

Kevin O'Connor

Founder and Principal  
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