

Safety of public at risk, union fliers read

■ Council members say firefighters have the tools they need even with five rigs pulled to save money.

BY MAGGIE O'BRIEN

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

The Omaha fire union says public safety has been jeopardized by budget cuts, pointing to what it says was a close call this month when a woman was rescued from a burning apartment building.

They say the woman's safety was unnecessarily put at risk because the city had taken fire units out of service as a cost-cutting move.

Union members are now knocking on doors and handing out fliers in an attempt to rally people against the sidelining of fire trucks. They spent the past week talking to residents in west Omaha, where rigs from two fire stations were taken out of service to save money.

"Attention Omaha residents: your safety is being compromised," the fliers read.

Two City Council members, however, say the circumstances of the apartment fire have been exaggerated by the union. They noted that the woman was rescued promptly by firefighters on the scene.

Jim Gentile, a spokesman for Fire Chief Mike McDonnell, said five pieces of equipment — an ambulance, a pumper truck, a

Cool cybe

As you stroll along 16th Street approaching Douglas Street in downtown Omaha, your smartphone beeps, telling you that you've reached a point of interest.

On the phone's screen appears a black-and-white photo taken in the 1920s of this same street bustling with shoppers in front of the Brandt Building.

Alongside the nearly century-old image on your screen is a menu of options: Would you like to know the building's history? Would you like to know more about the Neo-Renaissance design?

Or maybe see images of that same



Fire union: Chief says equipment can be moved to keep all areas of city safe

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ladder truck, a rescue truck and a hazardous materials unit — have been taken out of service.

The department has nearly 50 rigs that are still being run to emergency calls.

McDonnell said the Fire Department has cut costs totaling about \$6 million over the past year, which includes transferring trucks to other stations or taking them out of service.

Nonetheless, he said, the department follows the safety guidelines outlined by the National Fire Protection Agency, which provides education, research and training for firefighters across the country.

McDonnell said fire officials are monitoring fire calls daily and would put trucks back in service if safety called for that.

"This is a balancing act," the chief said. "We'll place and move equipment to make sure ... the citizens of Omaha are equally protected, north, south, east and west."

Mayor Jim Suttle has taken various steps to rein in Fire Department costs. Those include reducing firefighter positions through attrition; taking fire trucks out of service; eliminating all civilian staff; closing a fire station; and hiring an accountant whose main duty is to look for ways to cut fire costs.

The fire union has been unhappy with some of the changes. The recent flier encourages Omahans to call Suttle's hotline, City Council members and the fire chief to protest.

"Your service has been reduced, but your taxes have increased," the flier says.

Union officials acknowledge that the city has financial struggles. But they maintain that trying to save money isn't worth the risk to residents and firefighters.

"All too often the focus is on the budget and the numbers

and what it costs," said Trevor Towey, union treasurer. "We're trying to say that there's a lot more to it."

City Council members Franklin Thompson and Jean Stothert, both critics of Fire Department spending, say firefighters still have the tools they need to do their jobs, even though some equipment has been removed from service.

"If other cities can deal with the recession and change with the times, then we can, too," Thompson said.

Towey said trucks have been parked at two fire stations: 80th and Dodge Streets and 111th and I Streets. One station is in Thompson's council district; the other is in Stothert's.

Towey said ladder trucks have equipment needed to handle large fires and rescue efforts. Ladder trucks typically have chain saws, axes and other tools that firefighters often need to break into a burning structure.

He said an April 16 fire illustrates the need.

Firefighters were called to an apartment complex fire near 116th and Arbor Streets. The ladder truck from the closest station — at 111th and I — had been taken out of service, so a ladder truck from the station at 144th Street and West Maple Road responded in its place.

Because the ladder truck came from farther away, Towey said, it took nearly 10 minutes for it to arrive. He said that's nearly double what the response time should have been.

The woman inside the second-floor apartment was rescued, though Towey said the delay could have put her in danger.

Thompson, however, noted that the woman was rescued and safe by the time the ladder truck arrived. Firefighters from two pumper trucks from the 111th and I station had arrived earlier and got her out.

Pumper trucks carry the water needed to put out a fire.

"She was treated within four minutes," Thompson said. "It's a moot point, because the personnel on the pumpers did all the things they were supposed to."

Neither Towey nor fire officials said they knew other details of the fire, such as how it started, whether the woman had a medical condition or how firefighters on the pumper truck were able to get her out of the apartment.

She was treated at Creighton University Medical Center, though details of the injuries were not released by the Fire Department.

The union has worked this year to build public support for firefighters. The union hosted a community meeting at Firefighters Hall last month to show people what they do and how city tax dollars are spent on fire services.

Besides the court of public opinion, union leaders also have taken their case to Douglas County District Court, suing the city for reducing staffing levels and taking trucks out of service. The city has won on some points, including the truck dispute, but the union has appealed and continues to fight.

A lawsuit involving staffing levels was heard this month by the Nebraska Supreme Court, which has yet to rule on the case.

The number of trucks in service also is a point of contention in contract negotiations. The Suttle administration has been in contract talks with the union since 2007.

Towey said the union's public relations effort is not an attempt to influence what happens at the bargaining table.

"It's not to gain leverage," he said. "It's more to let the public know that this is happening."

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with a "star party" from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. at Hyde Memorial Observatory in Holmes Park.

For more information, contact Jack Dunn at jdunn1@unl.edu or visit the Astronomy Day page at www.spacelaser.com/ADay2011.html. — AP

Medical training slated across state

LINCOLN — The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services is scheduling several training sessions around the state in May.

The locations and topics vary. For example, there will be sessions on geriatrics in Holdrege on May 5, in Omaha on May 14 and in Dixon on May 17. There will be a session on rapid trauma assessment in Decatur on May 2 and a session on trauma case review in Oakland on May 9.

A session on burns will be held May 10 in Stanton and one on farm accidents on May 2 in Stromsburg.

For more information on the workshops, visit the Health and Human Services EMS calendar website, www.hhs.state.ne.us/ems/emscalender.htm.

The free workshops are aimed at emergency medical technicians, first responders and the general public. — AP

Youngster killed in ATV crash

CHADRON — A boy has died after a four-wheeler crashed east of Chadron.

Law enforcement officials confirmed the crash happened Friday evening but declined to release more information until Monday, after the boy's relatives had been notified.

The boy was a student at East Ward Elementary School in Chadron. — AP

Man found dead in crashed car is ID'd

CERESCO — Authorities have released the name of a Ceresco man found dead in his vehicle in Rock Creek in Saunders County.

Sheriff Kevin Stukenholtz said the victim was 55-year-old Ross Davison, who was reported missing Thursday by his daughter. He had failed to show up for an appointment Wednesday night in Valparaiso.

Stukenholtz said the operator



For tattoo fans, this weekend's Immersed in Ink Festival