

[FIRE/WILDFIRE](#)

Fire Department eyes shakeup amid rising demand

With medical calls surging and wildfire risks growing, council tries to reconcile competing priorities

by [Gennady Sheyner](#) January 28, 2025

<https://www.paloaltoonline.com/fire-wildfire/2025/01/28/fire-department-eyes-shakeup-amid-rising-demand>



Palo Alto firefighter drives out of the Mitchell Park fire station in 2022. File photo by Gennady Sheyner.

If things go as planned, the south end of Palo Alto will face a massive transformation in the coming decade, as the city redevelops Cubberley Community Center, builds a park in Ventura and turns commercial segments along El Camino Real and San Antonio Road into residential communities.

Yet the south end of the city is currently also remarkable for an amenity that it lacks: a fire engine. The Mitchell Park fire station, known as Station 4, stopped operating an engine in the early days of the pandemic, when the City Council responded to plummeting revenues by cutting expenses and slashing positions. The Fire Department saw its authorized daily personnel slip from 26 personnel during a 24-hour period in 2018 to 23 personnel during this Covid era. Fire Station 2 on Hanover Street, in the College Terrace neighborhood, saw service levels drop during a “brownout.”

Since then, the department has been slowly recovering. It now has a daily staffing of 25 personnel per 24-hour shift, according to a recent report from Fire Chief Geo Blackshire. But in some areas, it continues to lag. During a discussion of Fire Department operations in November, Blackshire cited an October 2023 study performed by the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), which noted that only two fire stations in the entire Santa Clara County didn’t have fire engines – and both are in Palo Alto.

This shortcoming is particularly notable because the agency also found that the Palo Alto Fire Department was the busiest fire agency in the county, with 107 incidents per 1,000 residents. By comparison, the neighboring city of Mountain View had 64 incidents per 1,000 residents. Between 2018 and 2022, Palo Alto has seen an average of 8,149 incidents per year, compared to 4,695 in Mountain View.

With the city's revenues gradually recovering from the Covid-era doldrums, council members have been gradually restoring positions. The budget that the City Council approved last June added back the Fire Department staffing that was required to operate a fire engine at Station 2. But the Mitchell Park station remains without an engine, a fact that is vexing some area residents and council members.

Penny Ellson, who lives in south Palo Alto, is among them. During a November discussion of Fire Department staffing levels, Ellson argued that a fire engine is "badly needed in the southeastern quadrant," particularly given the prominence of fire-sensitive Eichler homes in the south Palo Alto neighborhoods.

"This area is about to experience a burst of housing construction which the city has zoned for, which can add to fire danger, as we've seen in San Jose and Redwood City where apartment complexes under construction caught fire," Ellson said during a November discussion of Fire Department staffing levels.

The loss of a fire engine also hits close to home for Annette Ross, a resident of College Terrace, which experienced the "brownout" during Covid.

"We pay plenty in taxes and you transfer considerable sums from the utility coffers to the general fund," Ross wrote to the City Council earlier this month. "There's really no justification for leaving any area of this city inadequately protected or subject to delayed response times."

With wildfires raging around Los Angeles County, the issue of fire protection took on a greater urgency for council members, who last Saturday approved naming "public safety" as one of their official priorities for the year (it replaced 2024's more nebulously worded

priority of “community health, safety, wellness and belonging”) and vowed to make further investments in emergency response.

“It is really high on everybody’s minds these days and this year, and addressing this is going to be important to our community,” said Vice Mayor Vicki Veenker, who proposed the wording change.

Is it necessary?



Palo Alto Fire Department vehicles parked in Fire Station 3 on Embarcadero Road on Feb. 24, 2021. Photo by Magali Gauthier.

While some council members, including Greer Stone, explicitly supported on Saturday adding a fire engine to Station 4, the change would entail difficult tradeoffs. It would, for one, strain the city budget. The city is projecting a budget gap of more than \$10 million in the coming year and similar deficits in each of the two following years.

Adding a fire engine, which contractually requires three firefighters to staff, and an ambulance for the 12-hour peak period would add more than \$3 million in expenses, according to staff analysis.

“We are looking at deficit spending already,” Assistant City Manager Kiely Nose said during the November discussion. “This will make the hole larger.”

There are also competing priorities within the department. While fires stoke very reasonable fears, it’s the medical calls that are dominating Fire Department responses and driving most discussions of staffing changes. The Fire Department’s annual report for 2023 showed that medical calls made up 62% of the calls that the Palo Alto Fire Department had responded to that year; fires made up 1%. The remainder were calls that had good intent but no actual emergency (15%), false alarms (13%), service calls such as when someone is stuck in an elevator (8%) and calls relating to hazardous materials (1%).

When council members discussed Fire Department staffing levels last November, a key concern was the high demand for medical service, which was straining resources. The 2023 study by LAFCO found that the Palo Alto Fire Department’s 90% percentile response time was 9 minutes and 41 seconds between January 2018 and June 2022. That’s 21% longer than its goal of reaching 90% of all response destinations within 8 minutes.

“I think we need to be focused on increased medical calls,” Mayor Ed Lauing, who at the time served on the Finance Committee, said. “What medical calls need is an EMT, not a fire truck.”

The LAFCO report cited the department’s Covid-era staffing reductions, including the elimination of 16 firefighter positions because of budget

reductions and pandemic impacts. It also made a case for increasing staffing, particularly near Mitchell Park.

The agency uses a workload metric called “unit hour utilization” (UHU), which connotes the time that a Fire Department unit is committed to an incident as a percentage of its total time on duty. The recommended level is no more than 10%. The LAFCO study concluded that the Palo Alto Fire Department is “excessively busy” and cited the medic at Station 4, which had a UHU of 19.1%. Meanwhile, Engine 61 at the Alma Street station had UHU of 10.7%, making it Palo Alto’s busiest fire engine.

“Given the level of growth projected for the City and existing level of utilization of each unit, it appears that there are challenges to meet the current and projected demand for service for both medic units and engine companies,” the LAFCO report states.

The agency concluded that adding an engine company to the Mitchell Park station would improve performance in that part of the city and that an additional medic unit would “improve sustainability and performance of the EMS transport response system citywide.”

One proposal, which Blackshire presented to the Finance Committee in November, would restructure the Fire Department by creating a new Emergency Medical Services Division. The division would consist of 25 full-time-equivalent positions: an EMS manager, 10 paramedics, 10 EMTs and an administrative assistant, along with three hourly medics who would fill in shift gaps and cover for vacations. Notably, these would be civilian positions and would need less training – and entail lower city expenses — than firefighters.

If this plan is adopted, firefighters who currently staff ambulances would be shifted to Engine 64 in Mitchell Park in 2027, and three firefighting positions would be reduced, according to a memo from the department.

Another option on the table is to simply staff a peak 12-hour ambulance and a full-time fire engine in Mitchell Park with additional firefighters, without creating the new civilian division. This would require an additional \$2.6 million in fire costs, according to the Fire Department, and \$700,000 in EMS costs.

Even without a fire engine at Mitchell Park, Blackshire told this publication that he believes the department's current operations model provides adequate fire protection in the south end of the city. Residents may view the fire engines at their local stations as neighborhood amenities, but to the department they are tools to be deployed as part of a citywide response plan. The department operates as a system, with resources deployed strategically to be most effective for different types of emergency responses, Blackshire said.

"For example, most of the city's high-rises are Downtown and on Stanford's campus; therefore, the ladder truck is best stationed at Fire Station 6 on campus," Blackshire wrote in an email.

The department's model reflects a confidence that a fire engine can get to the neighborhood around Mitchell Park within its response time standard, which is 8 minutes or less 90% of the time, he said. Fire engines from both Station 3, near Rinconada Park, and Station 5, near Juana Briones Park, can both meet that standard, he added.

Blackshire also noted that 73% of the emergency responses in the neighborhoods around Station 4 are medical emergencies, so having an

ambulance at that station is very beneficial. That said, he noted the department is exploring ways to bring a fire engine back to Station 4 “as reasonably as possible.”

Temporary fix



Fire Chief Geo Blackshire, center, answers questions during a “Meet the Chiefs” event on May 10, 2022. Photo by Gennady Sheyner.

For the time being, however, south Palo Alto residents will continue to rely on other stations for fire protection. The Mitchell Park fire station, which was built in 1953, is set to be demolished this year and then rebuilt to meet modern needs and seismic standards. The rebuilt fire station will include two drive-through apparatus bays and a third stand-by apparatus bay, though it’s not yet clear how many actual apparatuses it will house.

While construction is unfolding, the Fire Department will establish a temporary outpost less than half a mile south of Mitchell Park, at Cubberley Community Center. Last March, the council approved a \$244,850 lease with Mobile Modular Management Corporation for a double wide modular trailer that will serve as a fire station for 24 months. The trailer will include three sleeping quarters, an office, two restrooms, a kitchen and a living room. But the temporary station would not, under the current plan, have a fire engine.

“The interim site will have one ambulance and will be used exclusively to respond to medical calls,” a report from March 2024 states.

That plan, however, is not set in stone. Next week, the council is set to approve a \$390,000 contract with Alex Kushner General Inc. for site preparation work at Cubberley, which includes installation of a carport and equipment structure; and required utility connections, according to a report from Public Works Director Brad Eggleston. The plan is to start building the temporary fire station at Cubberley immediately after the contract is approved, with completion targeted for May 2025. Once that’s completed, the city would launch construction of the new Fire Station 4 at Mitchell Park.

Blackshire noted that the temporary station at Cubberley would be able to accommodate either an engine or an ambulance. The department’s current plan, he said, is to continue to work with the city manager and the council to staff Station 4 with an engine and to add a peak 12-hour ambulance to meet the demand for medical emergencies and the risk of fire.

With the Los Angeles wildfires shifting Palo Alto’s priorities, the council will consider in the coming budget season how to both address residents’ concerns about fire engines and meet the department’s goals

for medical response. Even before the recent fires, Council member Pat Burt, who chairs the Finance Committee, observed that the two priorities “are in tension with each other when we’re looking at the budget.” Lauing, who made the case for prioritizing medical response during the November discussion, stressed minutes later the importance of also taking care of fire protection.

“We only need one bad fire in the wrong area – and it’s a disaster,” Lauing said.

Even though Blackshire said he believes that the city’s current model provides “adequate fire protection in south Palo Alto,” he said he appreciates the community feedback on this topic. The lack of a fire engine at Station 4, he wrote, “raises concerns about how fast a fire engine can get to a structure fire in that neighborhood.”

“Whether long-term or short-term, the plan is to staff an engine at Station 4 as soon as reasonably possible,” Blackshire said



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Gennady Sheyner covers local and regional politics, housing, transportation and other topics for the Palo Alto Weekly, Palo Alto Online and their sister publications. He has won awards for his coverage... [More by Gennady Sheyner](#)

Join the Conversation

9 Comments

1. **ALB** says:

[January 28, 2025 10:34 am at 10:34 am](#)

Safety for residents is the issue. Now it appears that the council understands that station 4 must be fully staffed. Yes Eichers burn down in minutes. Yes density is arriving as major projects are being constructed with more in the pipeline for south Palo Alto. So glad the council is listening. Forty three million dollars for sidewalks compared to a couple of million to ensure safety shows a disconnect re: priorities. Fire Chief Blackshire poses an interesting concept re: medic reorganization. To change the model it would have to be studied. Thanks to all residents who have written the council to alert our public servants of the dire need to allocate funding and get our fire houses fully staffed.

2. **Online Name** says:

[January 28, 2025 10:35 am at 10:35 am](#)

Thank you for covering this critical issue.

“The city is projecting a budget gap of more than \$10 million in the coming year and similar deficits in each of the two following years. Adding a fire engine, which contractually requires three firefighters to staff, and an ambulance for the 12-hour peak period would add more than \$3 million in expenses, according to staff analysis.

“We are looking at deficit spending already,” Assistant City Manager Kiely Nose said during the November discussion. “This will make the hole larger.”

One has to question the city's priorities when it won't spend \$3,000,000 on our safety while jumping at the chance to spend \$43M on new sidewalks, big bucks on a new parking garage to replace the parking lots it will eliminate, retail consultants to recommend sleeping pods, top raises for all employees, \$500,000 for a consultant to conduct school bike safety assemblies, \$250,000 on a consultant to "study" artificial surf safety when that info is already available online...

3. **barronparker2** says:

[January 28, 2025 10:49 am at 10:49 am](#)

Excellent article, Gennady. The cost of fire trucks has recently shot up, along with national shortages and long delivery times (up to 4 years!). Matt Stoller explains how 3 firms are responsible: they bought up all the smaller makers and are now reaping huge profits. The situation needs a congressional investigation, and Stoller's article — "Did a Private Equity Fire Truck Roll-Up Worsen the L.A. Fires?" — is worth reading:

<https://www.thebignewsletter.com/p/did-a-private-equity-fire-truck-roll>

4. **connie Kettendorf** says:

[January 28, 2025 11:08 am at 11:08 am](#)

A city that has a 1.2 billion dollar income can find money for its primary responsibility to the citizens, which is PUBLIC SAFETY. Come to sign a petition on my front porch, 3719 Grove Ave, to fund a fire truck for south Palo Alto. We are losing our fire truck at Station 4. Of course, it is this end end of town which is losing a firetruck.

5. **Consider Your Options** says:

[January 28, 2025 12:56 pm at 12:56 pm](#)

Thank you for covering this important issue, Palo Alto Online.

Public Safety, including fire safety, is an essential, core responsibility of the City. South Palo Alto is entering a construction period of historically significant scale, with thousands of new tall, high density housing units being built at this end of town (that may require larger engines for fire response during their construction periods and longer term). There is increased fire danger associated with construction. We know this. Plan forward for response times that relate to construction and building needs that are coming; don't just look at today's irrelevant response times.

Also, the city has insurance money for replacement of the fire engine that was destroyed in a 2019 crash during a 101 emergency stop. (Truck driver ran into the fire engine, totalling the engine and killing the truck driver.) With fire engine costs rising, why is the city waiting to replace the destroyed engine? I have been told that the insurance money for the replacement of the totaled fire engine is tucked in the budget somewhere. (I can't find it. Please earmark it, so the city and citizens don't forget its intended use.)

I view fire safety as an essential, core service of the city, not as "an amenity." Evidently, city staff views fire safety for this part of town as "an amenity." Hmmm. What I see is a big, gaping hole in engine availability in ONE quadrant of the city. When staff calculates existing response times, most of the recent fires in this quadrant have been close to the Embarcadero station—in the midtown area. We've been lucky. Please break out response times for areas south of East Meadow and east of Alma where the new high

density construction will be. Then layer over that data projected additional fire risk for the high density construction period that is commencing.

In my view, PUBLIC SAFETY (fire, public works, police, transportation, natural disasters, building code enforcement) is the single most important thing I pay taxes for, and I expect it to be prioritized. I can think of several city projects and programs that really are “amenities”, like Palo Alto Link and others, that could be eliminated or reduced to fund life- and home-saving fire services.

6. **Resident 1-Adobe Meadows** says:

[January 28, 2025 1:24 pm at 1:24 pm](#)

When I read other articles they reference a Consultant. How many Consultants do we have? We do not need Consultants – we need Fire Stations and Fire personnel. I was up at SLAC and they said that Menlo Park will no longer support that location – PA will though it is in MP. They need a herd of sheep or goats to clear all of that open field growth.

It is peculiar that during Covid people were home – not at work. That would increase the requirement for fire protection – not reduce it. We do not need more cement on the streets. We need our stations fully staffed with people and trucks.

7. **connie Kettendorf** says:

[January 28, 2025 2:31 pm at 2:31 pm](#)

We have reciprocity for fire safety with surrounding cities. Why would those cities ever honor the latter when those cities are well aware that Palo Alto has shortchanged fire protection?

8. **Bystander** says:

[January 28, 2025 6:07 pm at 6:07 pm](#)

I feel sure that with hindsight, the Los Angeles councils and fire departments wish they could go back 4 weeks and do things differently.

Look at this as our opportunity to do things right before the impending tragedy that might or might not come, either from building sites, old eichlers or similar.

The 4 businesses that were destroyed by fire are still basically untouched since the day of the fire. Tests on soil samples are the excuse given, but we still do not even know the cause of the fire except that it started in the dry cleaners. There was plenty of discussion at the time as to how long it took PAFD to arrive. Neighbors were definitely concerned but since it was business not residential there seemed to be less urgency. Anyway, that should be a wake up call to all south Palo Alto. We do not want a repeat performance with delays from getting the help needed. The delay could be life threatening in a residential fire.

Getting the funds to bring PAFD up to reliable service is imperative. We don't want criticisms after a tragedy about fire trucks taking too long to get to a fire.

9. **Online Name** says:

[January 28, 2025 6:25 pm at 6:25 pm](#)

Sure, neighbors were definitely concerned but so what? Since when does Palo Alto listen to the neighbors / residents / taxpayers when they can hire consultants with no local knowledge with our money knowing they can keep raising our utility rates in perpetuity?

Don't they care about the lost sales taxes from the 4 burned out local buildings? The community?

People have been complaining about what a fire hazard a hoarder is and have repeatedly reported him to code enforcement showing how visible the hazardous trash is. Has anything been done? Of course not.

Virtue signalling so much easier than listening to residents and understanding what the problems are or — horrors — actually solving problems.

Where's the oversight? What was the Finance Committee thinking when they allowed this? Their next shot at higher office and ensuring they'll have deep-pocketed backers for future campaigns?