

[NEWS](#)

## Palo Alto looks to boost fire protection as budget outlook gets cloudier

*Plan to boost staffing comes as city sees drop in sales tax revenues*



by [Gennady Sheyner](#) February 20, 2025 8:00 am

<https://www.paloaltoonline.com/news/2025/02/20/palo-alto-looks-to-boost-fire-protection-as-budget-outlook-gets-cloudier>



Palo Alto is considering adding a fire engine to the Mitchell Park station as part of a mid-year budget proposal. Embarcadero Media file photo by Veronica Weber.

Seeking to calm concerns about inadequate fire protection in the southeastern corner of the city, the Palo Alto City Council is preparing to add a fire engine to the Mitchell Park station as part of a suite of budget adjustments that it plans to approve on Monday night.

The addition of a fire engine and a captain to Station 4 is both the most popular and contentious proposal in the mid-year adjustment process proposed by the Administrative Services Department. Fire Station 4 at Mitchell Park has been without an engine since the pandemic. And while Fire Chief Geo Blackshire has maintained that the area is adequately covered by fire engines based at Rinconada Park in the Barron Park neighborhood, residents have been raising concerns that their part of the city remains vulnerable without a properly staffed fire engine.

But while the engine is a welcome addition to Station 4, the city's plan for staffing it has raised eyebrows among residents and freighters. Under the current proposal, the city would add a captain to Fire Station 4 and rely on a cross-staffing model in which a three-person crew operates both the ambulance and the fire engine.

Firefighters have criticized this proposal, noting that the cross-staffing model would effectively leave the engine useless when the ambulance and the crew is out for service. Capt. Joe Penko, president of International Association of Fire Fighters, Local 1319, [told this publication](#) that the union supports a fully staffed engine at Mitchell Park.

The budget proposal calls for adding \$315,000 to the public safety budget to support the fire engine. A report from Lauren Lai, director of the Administrative Services Department, characterized the cross-staffing proposal as a near-term approach that “provides additional resources to the area and the City as a whole, while long-term staffing proposals and funding decisions continue.”

In addition to adding a fire engine, the new budget proposal calls for adding a program assistant position to the Palo Alto Junior Museum and Zoo to support customer service at an annual cost of \$125,000. It also proposes spending \$100,000 to repair storm and irrigation pump stations at Baylands Golf Links, the municipal golf course.

The moves come as the city is preparing for a period of financial uncertainty following several years of post-pandemic revenue growth. Even though revenues currently exceed pre-pandemic levels, a new report from the Administrative Services Department hints at turbulence in the months to come, with sales tax revenues lagging behind expectations in the first four months of fiscal year 2025, which began on July 1.

As part of the city’s proposed mid-year adjustment strategy, staff is recommending decreasing the sales tax revenue in the annual budget for \$3.9 million, or about 10%. This would represent a reversal from the city’s post-pandemic trends. The budget that the council adopted last summer projects \$39.6 million in sales tax revenues, up from \$37.5 million that it had received in sales tax revenues in 2024.

The main reason, according to staff, is a drop in auto sales and leasing. The city now expects car sales to revert back to 2023 levels after an uptick in 2024 that officials attribute to pent-up demand and attractive pricing for electric cars.

A new report from Chief Financial Officer Lauren Lai notes that the city's prior budget exceeded staff estimates by 1% or about \$2 million.

"Unfortunately, this revenue trend has not continued in the first and second quarters of fiscal year 2025, with some major tax revenue categories tracking below budget levels," the report states. "The downward revenue trend is not unique in Palo Alto, as the State and many other municipalities including those within Santa Clara County are being affected by lower sales tax revenue and uncertain economic future."

Some of these losses are offset by strong performance in other revenue categories, with hotel tax revenues projected to go up by \$600,000, documentary transfer tax revenues projected to rise by \$1.4 million, and revenues from utilities users tax set to go up by \$1.1 million in the current fiscal year.

Council members have acknowledged the growing uncertainty in the city's economic outlook. During the council's annual retreat last month, Mayor Ed Lauing proposed a set of guidelines to govern the city's actions this year, which include taking "a more cautious approach to budgeting decisions in light of economic uncertainty and a new administration." He alluded to recent actions by the Trump Administration to freeze federal funding for a wide range of programs.

“We always take a cautious approach to our budgeting but a more cautious approach this year, in light of new economic uncertainties, especially with the new administration that seems like every hour is making changes that could impact us,” Lauing said during the retreat.

The Feb. 24 action is a precursor to what promises to be a series of difficult discussions that the Finance Committee will undertake in May, when it starts reviewing City Manager Ed Shikada’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2026. The city’s long-range financial forecast projects budget shortfalls of \$12 million in the next year and \$7.9 million the following year.

Staff proposes closing the gap in the current and future years by tapping into the city’s budget reserves, according to the new report. This includes using \$9.1 million from the budget stabilization reserve to support the mid-year adjustments, an action that would bring the reserve down to \$54 million. That’s \$400,000 below the council’s target of having the reserve at 18.5% of general fund expenses, according to staff.

“Over the longer term, staff anticipates continued uncertainty with the new Federal administration,” Lai’s report states. “Impacts to major taxes and other key sources of revenue will be monitored in light of this change and staff will continue to update the Council regarding changes to the fiscal year 2025 fiscal outlook and beyond.”



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## Join the Conversation

14 Comments

1.  **ALB** says:

[February 20, 2025 9:16 am at 9:16 am](#)

Safety is the council's priority as stated at their retreat. Density in south PA is imminent with builder's remedy projects and others pegged for this part of town. I grew up in Eichers and in Los Arboles a close distance to fire station no. 4. These wooden structures are through out south Palo Alto. They can burn to the ground in less than fifteen minutes. The residents elected the council to work on their behalf. Now support us by allocating funding for fire personnel and the engine.

[Reply](#)

2. **BobH** says:

[February 20, 2025 10:20 am at 10:20 am](#)

Interesting how the city decided to not have a fire engine and staff in south Palo Alto. I bet the north Palo Alto stations are fully staffed. Why don't they just transfer an engine and staff from Fire Station 3 to the Mitchell Park station? Or wouldn't the cross staffing be OK for that part of the city...

Saving money on fire safety is just stupid. Anyone think what happened in LA couldn't happen here?

3. **connie Kettendorf** says:

[February 20, 2025 10:24 am at 10:24 am](#)

The Council has lost its way. FUND FIRE FIRST!  
As an example of skewed priorities, consider how much was spent on the dinosaur statues at the Junior Museum, at a time the city was strapped for money. "The contract with the firm Blue Rhino Studio wasn't expected to be controversial. The outdoor exhibit has long been viewed as an element in the recent renovation of the children's museum and zoo at 1451 Middlefield Road. The council had already approved a \$214,706 contract with Blue Rhino in April 2021 to fabricate three large dinosaurs for the exhibit...." Now they want to give the Junior Museum another 125K a year?! And we have to pay to get in to see Dino? Yet the City quibbles with funding the fire fighters, staffing the fire stations, crying poor mouth? The wasteful spending in this city goes on and on, year after year, spent on sidewalk art that offends our police officers, painted trees and Dinosaurs, and contractors who produce little at great expense. The Council no longer respects its PRIMARY mandate to protect the residents, abundantly and redundantly. FUND FIRE FIRST!

4. **Anne** says:

[February 20, 2025 10:37 am at 10:37 am](#)

Fact check: Rinconada Park is not in the Barron Park neighborhood.

5. **Plantfruittrees** says:

[February 20, 2025 11:07 am at 11:07 am](#)

To the city council: fund a fully-staffed fire station at Mitchell Park. Period. What are you there for if you're not willing to do the most basic thing to protect the residents of this city? Would you want to have to live with yourselves if someone died because of your choices? Because that will surely happen at some point if you don't.

1. **connie kettendorfsays:**

[February 20, 2025 11:54 am at 11:54 am](#)

You are correct; someone will die. When people die in a fire, we will rightfully sing the praises of our brave fire fighters who will do the best they can with the limited resources they have and their skeleton crew. The fire fighters will risk their lives for us. When someone dies, the powers that be will lament the tragedy. The tragedy will arise from the fact that it was preventable, if the powers that be had allocated safe funding for our fire protection. The deaths will be due to willful neglect on the part of the powers that be. They will indeed have blood on their hands because of their "choices," as you say.

1. **Plantfruittrees** says:

[February 20, 2025 12:29 pm at 12:29 pm](#)

As I understand it, OSHA requires that firefighters not go into a burning building unless two go in and



two stay out to watch for danger. You have to have four in order to run in to save someone.

I can attest to the wisdom of this: one of my friends was the first female firefighter hired in that town in Maryland. She and a new recruit started to head into a building and she grabbed him and pulled him out of the way just as a burning support beam came crashing down on where he'd just been. You need two sets of eyes, and people outside keeping watch there, too. Fires don't just stay where one person can keep tabs on them.

6. **Online Name** says:

[February 20, 2025 11:24 am at 11:24 am](#)

The Junior Museum and Zoo has been flawed since it was first conceived because the consultants were clueless at how the previous free zoo functioned. Back when it was free, the area near the entrance was always packed with kids and caretakers, many of whom wanted to use the toilets.

When they went to paid admissions, attendance fell so they kept raising admissions fees, the reservation was screwy for years and had to be redone etc etc.

Which begs the question: Why does money keep flowing to pet projects like the Junior Museum and Zoo but not for basics like fire protection where the city then pleads poverty and budget deficits.

No surprise retail sales tax revenues fell. When was the last time PA sent out \*weekly newsletters\* like the Los Altos Village Assn announcing new shop and restaurant openings, profiling the bands at First Friday and which sponsors lots of great events like the recent sold-out Chocolate Stroll at \$40 per person

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

[February 20, 2025 11:53 am at 11:53 am](#)

Sounds like we need to see the WHOLE budget. WE appear to have a lot of consultants – one appears in every article about a Problem. Another article about funding for non=profits. There is a whole category of support services to the city which may be political in nature. Let's look at all of it because there are a lot of topics out there that are controversial and we need to avoid.

8. **connie Kettendorf** says:

[February 20, 2025 1:24 pm at 1:24 pm](#)

Our present fire protection policy, enacted by City Manager Keene, is based on a 2011 model from a small town in Virginia. It is meant to help small, poor, rural communities with limited resources to, frankly, do the best they can. The latter does not describe the affluent community of Palo Alto. Palo Alto should use best practices, as dictated by OSHA and countless fire experts around the country. Shame on our present city manager for continuing to push that staffing model, all to save money on firefighters! The City Council must each individually step forward to proactively support

and demand full fire coverage.

They should be in the front seat of this issue. It is their mandate to FUND FIRE FIRST.

9. **Chris** says:

[February 20, 2025 5:30 pm at 5:30 pm](#)

Misleading Staffing Numbers and Shrinking Resources

It was misleading for city officials to claim that Palo Alto Fire has 114 personnel— because that number includes administrators and other non-emergency staff. The real number that matters is how many firefighters are on duty at any given time to respond to emergencies.

Current Staffing (2025)

Palo Alto currently has 24 firefighters on duty each day:

- 5 engines (3 firefighters each)
- 1 truck (3 firefighters)
- 3 ambulances (2 firefighters each)
- 1 battalion chief

This totals 24 firefighters plus one shift supervisor. The city's proposal to cross-staff Engine 64 would only add one additional firefighter per shift—barely increasing overall staffing.

Past Staffing (2000's)

When many of today's firefighters were hired, Palo Alto had significantly more resources:

- 7 engines (3 firefighters each)
- 1 truck (3 firefighters)
- 1 rescue unit (3 firefighters)
- 2 ambulances (2 firefighters each, with one operating only during daytime hours)

- 1 battalion chief

This totaled 31 firefighters plus one shift supervisor, meaning firefighting resources have been reduced by nearly 23% over the past 17 years.

10. **Bystander** says:

[February 20, 2025 10:09 pm at 10:09 pm](#)

So many questions. Here's one. How can a fire engine that needs to cross the Caltrain tracks with increasing numbers of gate crossings be the quickest option for getting to a fire in south Palo Alto from Barron Park? Not just one train but often two trains pass so close together that the gates don't open in-between.

11. **chris** says:

[February 20, 2025 10:28 pm at 10:28 pm](#)

With the CC intent on antagonizing the Federal government with their ill-considered resolution to be taken up Monday, you can kiss most budgeted Federal money away. More budget cutting in store.

12. **Online Name** says:

[February 21, 2025 8:44 am at 8:44 am](#)

Speaking of the trains and the crossings, not a day goes by that there aren't lots of articles about how the Trump Admin is planning to cut \$4 BILLION in federal funding for CA High Speed Rail.

Instead of pontificating with the resolutions, funding gravy trains of consultants many of whom pitch the exact same "solutions" to all of their clients and constant utility rate hikes, maybe our leaders, city staff and all their highly paid consultants could start following the news re federal funding.

Also, those pushing extreme unrealistic projects like cutting traffic deaths to zero and further slowing all traffic which will realistically impact emergency vehicles, might ask themselves why every single community in the SF Bay Area went much more heavily for Trump.