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Testimony of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau

Before the
Boston City Council

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Regarding: Improving The Boston Fire Department

- The Fire Department's fire suppression services are excellent, but come at a high financial and human capital cost from operational and administrative inefficiencies and an imbedded culture that resists change and diversity within the ranks.
- The MMA Consulting Group report of 1995 and the O'Toole Commission report of 2000 provide a comprehensive, critical assessment of the Department's operations, management, imbedded culture, discipline, supervision and training.
- Visits by the O'Toole Commission members to four cities demonstrated that Boston's fire management and administrative operations are behind other cities even though its spending per capita is one of the highest in the country. Boston's fire costs per capita, for example, were the second highest in a survey of 11 comparable cities.
- The key contract issues raised in the reports were included in the Administration's bargaining position. However, implementation of the other recommendations has been very limited. So far, from the O'Toole Commission report, the Mayor has appointed his Chief Operating Officer as Acting Fire Commissioner and a Fire Chief and just recently hired a new Human Resources Director.

Recommendations

1. The union leadership and members should recognize the changes made in other public safety labor contracts and agree to similar terms in this contract. The Menino Administration has negotiated generous contracts recently for police officers and teachers in return for language changes to improve services. The same should be expected for the firefighters within reason. **The firefighters' contract should be changed to:**

- Reduce the rate of injured-on leave by providing for light or partial duty and the use of an independent medical examiner to decide work eligibility if needed.

- Restrict shift-swapping and acting out of grade to fill vacancies. These practices affect the allocation and continuity of staffing and interfere with efficient management. Normal vacation and personal time would not be affected.
- Institute drug testing. It has worked successfully in the Police Department.
- Exempt top management positions from the firefighters union. All uniformed officers except the Commissioner and Fire Chief belong to the same union.

2. The Menino Administration should present an action plan, based on the recommendations of the MMA Consulting Group and O'Toole Commission reports that it will seek to implement outside of the contract changes. The Acting Commissioner and Fire Chief should select a point person from the senior team to manage the implementation of the action plan. The Department should issue quarterly progress reports. These were the steps taken by the Police Department following the release of the St. Clair report in 1992.

3. The Mayor should not delay in appointing a new civilian Fire Commissioner. The recommendation to appoint a civilian Commissioner was made in January 2000 and 18 months later, the City's Chief Operating Officer is still splitting his role as COO and Acting Fire Commissioner. The Bureau agrees with the O'Toole Commission that a civilian Commissioner with significant management and leadership experience as well as a commitment to providing progressive and dynamic leadership is needed. The civilian Commissioner will bring greater accountability to the Department and professional management expertise to the operations of the organization. The Commissioner would work closely in this effort with the Fire Chief who is more involved in the day-to-day operations of the Department. The dual role of Commissioner and Chief that existed in the past is not practical now. Two leaders are needed to improve the operations and management of the Department while also challenging its imbedded culture that resists change and diversity within the ranks.

4. To find the right person for the Fire Commissioner's position, Mayor Menino should appoint a blue ribbon search committee with a mandate to recommend three finalists. When the Mayor worked with the School Committee in appointing a new Superintendent of Schools in 1995, he appointed a blue ribbon committee chaired by Cathy E. Minehan, President and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. That same approach should be followed now with adequate resources provided to conduct a credible search. The Administration's low-key search for a Commissioner has not produced a viable candidate and should be replaced by the blue ribbon committee approach. A public commitment by the Mayor to the long-term improvement in the Fire Department, similar to his pledge for educational improvement, would facilitate the search process.