

TO: Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke
FROM: Katharine Sadowski, Chief of Staff
DATE: June 1, 1988
SUBJECT: Fire Station Closing Options

Executive Summary

In December 1987 you were sworn into office on the campaign promise of aiding Baltimore's schools and balancing the budget. You decided closing three fire stations and limiting service at a fourth would balance the budget without hurting the safety of the city. The public resisted this plan stating the city didn't have the evidence to back this claim. In the face of resistance, **I recommend implementing a firehouse consolidation plan backed with a study and city museum.**

Background

The city of Baltimore's community pride is attached to the fire department, particularly in South Baltimore, but the fire department is outdated and losing money. The Baltimore fire department grew rapidly after the great fire of 1904 until 1970 making fire stations a part of neighborhood identities. Today "super firehouses" have over six times the capacity of older firehouses making many of Baltimore's fire stations outdated and inefficient. In 1984 Mayor Schaefer noticed the fire departments "excess capacity." He attempted to close South Baltimore's Locust Point Engine 17 to save money. Local resistance forced him to reopen the station. Over the past three years fire station conditions have worsened. The city faces larger funding constraints due to the loss of \$23 million in federal revenue sharing.

In 1987 you were elected on the campaign promise of aiding Baltimore's schools and balancing the budget. To achieve these goals, you decided to save \$2.4 million per year by closing three fire stations and limiting service at a fourth. The finance department stated these closures would not reduce fire protection in the city. To implement this, you had the fire department decide which fire stations to close. You then requested Fire Chief Peter O'Connor announce this plan to the city. The fire department announced its decision to close two stations in South Baltimore, including Riverside. You predicted this method of fire station closures would avoid the same problems Mayor Schaefer faced because 1) it would not target Locust Point, 2) it gave the fire department the final say, and 3) it would rally the entire city, rather than individual neighborhoods, behind the cause of cutting costs. You believed your relations with news reporters would keep support for your plan high; however your decision upset individually affected neighborhoods.

Cutting the budget by closing fire stations was and remains politically unpopular in South Baltimore. The public, including city council members and the Riverside Community Association, spoke against your plan at a city council meeting in late May. After listening to their concerns, you agreed to push back the firehouse closures to September 1. Now they demand more. Both city council members and Riverside Community members, including local firefighter Bernard Gus, believe there is not enough evidence to close these fire stations while assuring public safety. They demand you conduct a study before closing Engine 12 in Riverside. You now face the dilemma of how to go through with making the right decision, closing the fire departments, the right way.

Option 1: Order a Study

You should hire a third party to investigate which fire stations to close. Conducting this study will show voters in Baltimore and especially Riverside you care about their opinion. The study will also provide the three affected neighborhoods a logical rationale for why their fire stations were chosen to close. This will give you legitimacy and credibility in those areas. It will also save the city money when the fire stations close. This option could allow you to close more stations in the future.

A study could come back stating your decision to close the three fire stations is unsafe. The affected neighborhoods and city could lose your confidence. This could result in you losing future elections and credibility throughout Baltimore. Not closing any fire stations could also result in an unbalanced budget and unmet campaign promises. Additionally, even if the study does prove your point, publicity could spin the story to make you seem weak and unable to control your district.

Pros: *Protects public interest, the right fire stations are chosen, saves money, potential to close more stations in the future*

Cons: *Undermines credibility, could lose re-election, difficult to close fire stations in the future*

Option 2: Closing Fire Stations

Closing all three fire stations and limiting service at the fourth by early September will save the city around \$2.4 million. This will help balance the budget and allow money to go towards other programs such as school aid. With the right publicity, your advances in education reform could outshine the negative publicity associated with closing fire stations.

People could decide you are a reckless politician for closing fire stations without a study supporting the claim that fire station closures will not hurt public safety. Bad publicity could make you seem self-interested. This could ruin your credibility making it difficult to both close more redundant fire stations in the future and run for re-election. Additionally, a serious fire occurring in one of the affected areas after the fire station closures would destroy your credibility. The city could overturn your action like Mayor Schaefer's.

Pros: *Balances the budget and saves money for education programs*

Cons: *Upsets local community, impossible to close more fire stations in the future, potential harm to the community, could lose credibility, could lose re-election, policy could get overturned*

Option 3: Firehouse Consolidation with Study and Museum Plan

This option has three parts. First, conduct a study to find out which firehouses are crucial. Second, publicly announce your decision to consolidate Baltimore's firehouses in an effort to protect the city. Instead of having many outdated firehouses, the city will consolidate local firehouses creating "super firehouses" with larger capacity. Third, communities should convert old fire stations into useful buildings, but the city should convert one of the old fire stations in South Baltimore into a museum.

This option will frame the problem positively. Instead of closing firehouses or getting rid of redundant firehouses, you are consolidating firehouses and creating stronger stations. This would help you gain legitimacy with the community because it addresses their safety concerns. There is also now the potential for future consolidations. It also does not undermine your original plan to cut costs. Additionally, letting communities decide how to convert old fire stations will maximize community involvement. Converting one South Baltimore fire station into a museum will also make the fire station a permanent part of their community and allow tourists to come and see a rich part of Baltimore history. This option will take the fire department into the future and maintain the community's sentimental value.

This is an expensive plan; it will require you to create a long-term plan with the community. This is both good and bad. This plan could have a large upfront cost due to the study and fire station renovations. This means the city might not save \$2.4 million in this fiscal year. Meaning you might not meet your campaign promises. In the long run, this plan would free revenue and ensure community security if you stayed in office. If you lost re-election, there is no guarantee the next mayor would finish the project. Additionally, if the study comes back saying all fire departments are necessary, you will have no way of cutting the budget, and you will lose credibility with your voters.

Pros: *Maintains community pride, protects public interest/ public safety, saves money in the long-term, acts as an effective compromise, gain legitimacy/ credibility*

Cons: *Long-term investment, requires good publicity, could lose re-election, could fail in the long-term, potential for a bad study*

Recommendation

I recommend you pursue *Option 3: Firehouse Consolidation with Study and Museum Plan*. The current situation in Baltimore is very divided. Your plan of closing the fire departments in September is in strict opposition to the city's plea for a survey investigation of fire stations. You have admitted you would like more evidence to support fire station closings, and this third option allows you to rebrand the survey without losing legitimacy. Although this plan has a large cost associated with it, there are many moving parts and you can implement the plan on a large or small scale. You must consider how the public will respond to this change in plan, though. To prepare for this, you must:

- Communicate with local community members, especially the Riverside Community Association
- Speak to Clint Coleman, your press secretary, about getting local news stations and newspapers to make sure this story stays positive
- In your communications emphasize the direct benefits of this program: increased safety, increased community involvement, maintaining community pride

This strategy will help you keep with your budget cut plan, while creating a new vision for the city of Baltimore. Sometimes the right decision done the right way, takes time.