

As overtime takes its toll, city fire crews back budget request for additional staff

Bryan McKenzie , Nolan Stout

Feb 23, 2020

Charlottesville firefighters say they are exhausted and burned out from working overtime to keep the department's ambulances operating.

City officials need to skip budgetary bandages and hire more staff, they say.

Officials with the city's firefighter union say some crew members are working up to 120 hours a week to cover shifts on the department's Fire Medic 1 ambulance stationed at the Ridge Street firehouse and Fire Medic 10 at the Fontaine Avenue station.

All of that overtime is costly. According to fire department figures, between Jan. 1 and Feb. 20, the department paid out \$84,102 in overtime. Of that, \$64,574 was to staff the Fire Medic 10 ambulance and put enough people onto firetrucks.

In addition, the department paid out \$12,228 in overtime to staff Fire Medic 1 who worked 12 hours a day during that time.

Another \$7,300 in overtime was spent from Jan. 18 to Feb. 20 to cover additional shifts when the Charlottesville-Albemarle Rescue Squad did not have a paramedic-level crew member on duty.

To cover demand, Charlottesville Fire Chief Andrew Baxter told staff in a memo that the department would reassign medics to ambulances from jobs in the department that usually do not go out on calls — including his own.

City officials have proposed a \$250,000 line item in the fire department budget to cover overtime, but even that does not fully address the problem, firefighters said.

The union supports a \$1.3 million budget request submitted by Baxter to hire enough personnel to fully staff the ambulances 24 hours a day.

“We’re not some labor group that just wants, wants, wants. There are industry standards and they’re not close to being met,” said firefighter Greg Wright, who is president of the city firefighters union. “These are safety issues for us and for the citizens, and that’s why we’re asking for these things. There are needs that are not being met.”

Charlottesville fire crews normally work 24-hour shifts, one day on, one day off for five days. Then they are supposed to have four days off.

“The first day of that weekend is spent just decompressing and getting back to your normal life. You then have some time to do things with your family or take care of things around the house,” Wright said. “But with the staff shortage, it’s easy to get into a situation where you’re working 72 hours straight. Then you have 24 hours off and have to come back and work another 48 hours straight. There is very little downtime and almost no time for family.”

The fire department budget request would hire a dozen more firefighters to staff the ambulances, which provide advanced emergency medical care for incidents such as heart attacks and strokes, car crashes and life-threatening trauma.

City Manager Tarron Richardson is expected to present his proposed budget Friday.

The union and fire department administrators have been trying for at least two years to get Charlottesville officials to hire more personnel, according to emails and documents from the city.

Adorned in bright yellow shirts, firefighters have attended City Council meetings in the past few weeks, urging the council to support the funding request. Some residents showed up to council meetings to support them.

During a recent meeting, activist Don Gathers urged the council to support the fire department's request.

"I don't think we can put a price on the safety of the citizens of Charlottesville," he said.

At a budget work session earlier this month, Richardson focused on shifting resources to address staffing issues and was not in support of adding positions immediately.

"What I'm saying is that is a lot of money all at once, but if you do it progressively over time, we can be able to get to certain places," he said at the meeting. "But doing it all at once — you know and I know that's not realistic — but we can look at a plan for us to move forward."

On Jan. 18, Baxter wrote to staff ordering Fire Medic 1 into service despite the overtime requirements to ensure a minimum of two fully staffed medic units were in service for emergencies in the city.

A medic unit has at least one paramedic as part of the crew. Paramedics must go through a two-year certification program that is often awarded as a college degree. They have significantly more medical training than emergency medical technicians, or EMTs, who respond to most ambulance calls.

“Our planning will consider utilizing existing [fire department] staff to place Fire Medic 1 in service as necessary to ensure adequate city medic unit coverage,” Baxter wrote to staff. “We will consider multiple options, including assigning already scheduled shift personnel in excess of our daily minimum staffing levels, overtime sign-ups, as well as the redeployment of medics, of all ranks — including me — from non-operations section assignments to medic unit slots.”

Between Jan. 18 and Feb. 3, the crews on Fire Medic 1 ran about 15 additional 12-hour shifts and clocked 107 hours in overtime pay, fire department figures show. How much money was spent to pay for that overtime was not immediately available.

The city never approved full crews when the two ambulances went into operation, firefighters and department administrators said. National industry standards recommend nine crew members for every ambulance that runs 24 hours a day. That provides for three crew members per shift to cover operations and off-site training and professional development, injuries, personal family sickness and approved leave.

The City Council approved three new crew members — one per shift — when the Fontaine station’s Fire Medic 10 ambulance went into 24-hour service in 2018.

No additional crews were added when the Ridge Street Fire Medic 1 ambulance went into service. The unit is scheduled to respond to calls from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weekdays, which are the peak times for emergency calls. It always has been staffed by crews working overtime.

“They created an additional fire company that had to be staffed and it put us into an overtime deficit right away and off the bat,” Wright said. “There have been two city managers and an interim city manager that have been made aware of this problem. We started working with Maurice Jones and then interim manager Mike Murphy and now City Manager [Richardson]. We’re working about 36 hours a pay period in overtime. That’s an average, but it’s pretty accurate.”

City fire officials estimate that overtime for Fire Medic 1 alone costs between \$200,000 and \$240,000 each year for 60 hours per week of coverage. That overtime increases when the volunteer-staffed Charlottesville-Albemarle Rescue Squad cannot staff an advanced life support ambulance because of a shortage of paramedics.

CARS provides basic life support ambulances for the city and the county. It primarily answers calls involving illness, falls and non-life-threatening medical issues, which account for more than 70% of medical calls.

The CARS governing board has drafted a letter of support for the fire department’s budget request and has sent it to Richardson, organization officials said.

Changes in industry standards adopted in the last decade eliminated a level of advanced training, called an intermediate EMT, that was authorized to respond to calls in place of a paramedic.

“Our partners with [CARS] have redefined their mission as a basic life support agency and can no longer consistently provide advanced life support transport service,” Deputy Fire Chief Emily Pelliccia wrote in a Dec. 3 email to city administrators.

That decreased the ability of CARS to respond to the most serious emergency calls and put more of the responsibility on the city fire department and the Albemarle County Fire Rescue Division.

“This is not a question of the ability of CARS to perform their job. They do a great job and we need them. Their service is built into the fabric of emergency response in the community,” Wright said. “We want them to be successful. We need their support, but they cover both the city and the county. They may have a unit in Scottsville, one in Earlysville and another in the urban ring when there is a call in the city.”

All city firefighters and police officers are certified as EMTs or advanced-level EMTs, with about 30 of those also certified as paramedics.

According to the city, firefighters start out making \$40,302 a year. Salaries may go as high as \$65,305.42, depending on years of service and training. Of the city’s current staff of 57 firefighters, 37 make less than \$50,000, before overtime, according to department figures.

Overtime increases during special events, such as the city’s Unity Day celebration and other events and festivals.

After the violent August 2017 Unite the Right rally, the department added street medics to provide immediate medical care in case of injuries or illness. Those positions also are filled with employees working overtime.

Firefighters say they love their jobs but are getting burned out from the constant overtime. They also feel like the city administration has ignored the problem.

“We’ve tried to be quiet. We’ve tried to make do,” Wright said. “People tend to think of firefighters as experts on public safety matters until we discuss staffing and funding — and then they want us to stay in our lanes.”

Charlottesville firefighters, police, community members rally for more funds

Nolan Stout

Mar 2, 2020

Employees of the city of Charlottesville and community members are calling for revisions to the city’s proposed budget.

Police officers and firefighters were joined by activists and other community members during the public comment portion of Monday's City Council meeting in advocating for spending measures.

City Manager Tarron Richardson formally presented his proposed \$196.6 million budget for fiscal year 2021, which starts July 1, later in the meeting. He also is laying out a \$35.3 million Capital Improvement Program and \$111 million in other dedicated funds.

The spending plan is a \$7.7 million, or 4.11%, increase over the fiscal 2020 budget.

About two dozen police department staff showed up to the meeting to advocate for their needs.

"These officers truly care about the community," said Officer David Curtis. "That's why they are all here on their day off."

Many officers referred to a comment Police Chief RaShall Brackney made to The Daily Progress in 2018, when she said the department was seeing a "mass exodus." At the time, the department was down 30 officers.

"When we lose good officers, we are less safe," said Officer Grant Davis. "We don't ever want to see another headline that says 'mass exodus.'"

Officers highlighted how the department has no pay scale and that salaries lag behind the Albemarle County and University of Virginia police departments, as well as a dearth of take-home cars.

Department members received a 4.9% pay raise on top of a city-wide 4.1% bump in the fiscal 2020 budget.

The city doesn't provide take-home cars for all officers, but Brackney has said that a "great majority" of officers receive the vehicles.

Davis said most officers don't actually live in the city because they can't afford it.

"Incentivize officers to stay here," he said. "Continue to invest in us so we can continue to invest in this city."

Officer Jeffrey Jaeger said the department's building desperately needs a massive renovation, referencing recent issues with the structure.

In February 2019, city officials discovered leaks in the department's building after a heavy rain. Subsequent tests were positive for microbial mold spores.

City officials have said no health issues related to mold were reported.

About 10 employees were moved from the basement to another part of City Hall after the mold was discovered.

The city approved contracts for about \$57,000 to address the mold and leaks by April 3.

Jaeger said other efforts to improve the building have been funded by the police foundation and the community.

"This facility, in other words, is quite literally a charity case," he said.

When city councilors asked Richardson about the building and the recent mold work, he alluded to a previous proposal for a massive new administrative complex.

“It’s an old building,” he said. “They do need some major modifications to their particular area.”

In the fall, the city issued a request for proposals billed as design work for the new complex, which would consolidate city and school division offices.

It was canceled two days later, with the city citing the short submission deadline. Richardson later said the proposal was only actually for a space study, not design.

The police department is housed in a building connected to City Hall at 606 E. Market St. that was constructed in 1966.

City officials say the main City Hall structure on the Downtown Mall was constructed in 1925 and expanded in 1967.

More than a dozen firefighters clad in yellow shirts attended Monday’s meeting to push for more personnel.

The department requested \$1.3 million for 12 new firefighters to staff ambulances for a department that is stretched thin. Richardson’s proposal does not add any positions.

Last week, Richardson called the staffing problem “an issue I inherited” and said Fire Chief Andrew Baxter needs to look at a long-term fix by reallocating staff.

Greg Wright, president of the city’s firefighters union, told the council that moving around staff is “literally the most dangerous option that exists.”

“Fire departments are our community’s insurance policy against chaos and disaster,” he said. “We are not in an economic downturn. The fiscal health of the city is excellent.”

Firefighter Andy Soccodato said that as the volume of calls continues to increase, staff and residents will be in danger.

“The decision to deny these positions is a hefty gamble,” he said. “Whether the city is choosing to gamble firefighters’ lives or citizens’ lives, it will end in tragedy.”

Mayor Nikuyah Walker said that the city is discussing the staffing issues and wants to make sure the department’s stress isn’t attributable to responding to calls in Albemarle County.

Several community members held signs asking for increased funding for the city’s Police Civilian Review Board.

An initial panel crafted a proposal that called for a budget of \$180,000 or at least 1% of the police department’s budget.

Richardson’s proposal includes \$150,000 in startup costs for the panel.

Later in Monday’s meeting, schools Superintendent Rosa Atkins was scheduled to present the division’s funding request of \$61.7 million. Richardson is only proposing \$59.4 million.

The gap comes as officials were at different starting points in crafting their spending plans.

Atkins’ request is a \$3.8 million increase over the amended fiscal 2020 allocation, which included \$468,000 later approved to hire six teachers for the gifted-education program.

Richardson's proposal bases funding off the adopted budget that included a \$57.36 million allocation.

While his proposal is \$2.1 million more than the adopted fiscal 2020 budget, it is only \$1.6 million over the current budget as amended.

Richardson's proposal does not raise any tax rates.

The city has, however, advertised a 2-cent increase in the real estate tax rate, which hasn't been raised since 1981 and was last lowered in 2008.

The increased rate would provide about \$1.6 million in new revenue.

Tax bills, however, will rise as reassessments saw a 7.2% average increase in value.

The council will hold a budget work session on Thursday. Public hearings on the budget proposal are planned for March 16 and April 6, with final approval set for April 14.

Richardson, firefighter trade barbs in heated email exchange

Nolan Stout , Bryan McKenzie

Mar 5, 2020

In a scathing email this week, Charlottesville City Manager Tarron Richardson attacked the leader of the city's firefighters union for his "limited scope of knowledge" on budgetary issues after the union leader called Richardson "willfully ignorant" of the department's needs.

Firefighters have been lobbying the city to approve a departmental request for \$1.3 million to fund 12 new firefighters to staff ambulances for a department that is stretched thin.

Richardson has called the staffing problem "an issue I inherited" and said the fire chief needs to better allocate staff. His proposed budget does not add any staff to the department.

Firefighter Greg Wright emailed the general City Council email address on Tuesday "imploing" the council to hold 2-2-1 meetings between Richardson and Fire Chief Andrew Baxter to address the issues, according to a copy of the email provided to The Daily Progress.

Such meetings include one or two elected officials to avoid public meeting requirements. Nothing prohibits employees or the public from requesting such meetings.

Emails to the general council email address are seen by several other officials, including Richardson.

Wright wrote that the department had made "MULTIPLE" attempts to ensure Richardson understood issues with staffing and the department's deployment model.

Wright wrote that there is "a clear disconnect" and alluded to comments Richardson made while presenting his proposed budget at

Monday's City Council meeting. Richardson misspoke and said all public safety employees received a 10% pay increase for the current fiscal year.

Department members received a 4.9% pay raise on top of a city-wide 4.1% bump in the fiscal 2020 budget.

Wright called Richardson "willfully ignorant" with a "complete lack of a basic understanding" that "cannot be tolerated" as the budget process moves forward.

Richardson, who was not directly sent the original email, replied and went on the attack.

"You are a firefighter who oversees a limited number of employees on a daily basis. Your educational achievements and certifications, as well as your limited work experience as a supervisor will never be a match to any of my qualifications or credentials," wrote Richardson, who holds a doctorate. "So, let's be clear about who is ignorant and overwhelmingly shallow as a professional in the field of public administration."

Richardson wrote that Wright's "failure to understand the basics" of departmental budgeting is "egregious being that you have been working in your capacity for such a long time." According to city salary lists, Wright was hired in 2011.

Richardson wrote that Wright has no authority to request 2-2-1 meetings with the City Council and told him to "gain a better understanding about your role and responsibilities as a firefighter."

"Then, one day we can have an intelligent conversation about budgets and personnel management in local government," Richardson wrote.

Wright said in an interview Thursday that firefighters are “doing everything we can to have professional discourse and it definitely fell off the rails.”

“It has had an effect on morale,” he said. “I’m aware the verbiage I used was direct, but I stand behind what I wrote and my statements that the city administration does not understand our staffing needs.”

Wright said that he was “taken aback” by Richardson’s response.

“We’re a highly educated group of employees who have the training and advanced certificates that allow us to administer drugs in emergency settings, to perform advanced cardiac care procedures and operate a million-dollar ladder truck in an emergency situation. We clearly are not illiterate or uneducated,” Wright said. “He was willing to put his response in black-and-white and share it. I can’t imagine what he’s saying when there’s no record of it.”

Richardson defended his response to Wright after a City Council budget work session Thursday evening and framed the issue around race.

“I’m not going to stand for someone calling me ignorant,” he said. “As a black man, I feel like if I don’t say anything, I don’t correct him, that he will say it to another person of color.”

Earlier Thursday, Councilor Michael Payne said the budget process is difficult and the city should “pull a consensus” on big issues, but had no comment on Richardson’s email.

Councilor Lloyd Snook said emails to the general council email address haven’t been coming through to his devices, therefore he hasn’t seen the entire exchange.

At Thursday's work session, Councilor Sena Magill said, "This is a very stressful time of year for everyone and I know there's a lot more than what's on the surface." She declined to elaborate on any other issues.

Fire Chief Andrew Baxter declined to comment for this story.

Charlottesville fire chief resigns after heated disputes with city manager

Katherine Knott , Nolan Stout

Jun 11, 2020

Charlottesville Fire Chief Andrew Baxter resigned Thursday, effective immediately, following numerous complaints against City Manager Tarron Richardson.

"In the year since your appointment as city manager, I have come to understand that we do not share the same vision for the Charlottesville Fire Department or of the leadership of the city government," Baxter wrote in his resignation letter. "I have faithfully served the Charlottesville community in this position since 2015. Despite leaving this formal leadership role with the city, I will continue to be active in this, my community."

Baxter and Richardson have battled for months, and the recent budget process highlighted their disagreements over the future of the fire department. Baxter's resignation sheds light on the discontent among longtime city leaders, many of whom also have left during Richardson's 13-month tenure.

Baxter blamed Richardson's management style for the departures in a March email, obtained by The Daily Progress on Monday via a request under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act.

"I believe in my heart that it [is] this specific type of behavior that has led to a steady loss of experienced leaders since Richardson's arrival last May," he wrote. "[A]nd, if left unchecked, will ultimately drive our City government toward a state of mediocrity never before encountered in this caring, dynamic resource-rich community."

On the same day of his announcement, the City Council discussed the job performances of Richardson, Baxter and a deputy city manager during an 11-hour closed session, the second special meeting held this week on the topic. Councilors didn't vote on anything in open session after either closed meeting.

Baxter's resignation was tendered Thursday while the council was still in the closed session.

Baxter, who took over as fire chief in 2015 after 20 years in Henrico County, was one of the few remaining city leaders who served during the deadly Unite the Right rally in 2017. Under his leadership, the department earned accreditation through an international agency and received other honors.

"I have reached a point in this role where my values and professional ethics will not allow me to continue to work in the current leadership

environment,” Baxter wrote in an email to staff. “Serving as your Fire Chief has been, without a shred of doubt, the greatest honor of my fire service career.”

Following Baxter’s resignation, Richardson appointed Emily Pelliccia, who has been with the Charlottesville Fire Department since 1994, as interim fire chief, according to a news release from the city.

“I thank Chief Baxter for his dedicated service to our community,” Richardson said in a city news release. “On behalf of the City, we wish Chief Baxter well in his future endeavors. The City will immediately start a national recruitment effort for our next Chief and I am grateful that Emily Pelliccia will serve in this interim capacity. “

Since March, Baxter has led the city’s response to the pandemic but was replaced in the last month by Deputy Chief Joe Powers. Baxter regularly gave updates on the city’s response to the virus on the Cville360 program but is no longer featured.

Baxter has been at odds with Richardson since at least October, according to the extensive cache of email exchanges that The Progress received. Monday’s closed session was scheduled after the council reviewed The Progress’ FOIA request.

Baxter has long resisted making cuts to the fire department that Richardson directed him to, according to the emails and his resignation letter.

Before the city’s budget process was derailed by the coronavirus, firefighters were lobbying the City Council to approve a departmental request for \$1.3 million to fund 12 new firefighters to staff ambulances for a department that Baxter has said is stretched thin.

The issues came to a public head in March in an email Richardson sent to firefighter Greg Wright, head of the city's firefighter organization. He chided Wright for his "limited scope of knowledge" on budgetary issues after the union leader called Richardson "willfully ignorant" of the department's needs and noted "a clear disconnect" between the department and city manager.

Richardson, who is African American, later defended his response and framed the issue as about race.

In an email obtained Monday, Baxter, who is white, told Wright that Richardson's response was "egregious."

"Many of us in senior leadership roles in our city were genuinely looking forward to new leadership after the chaos and drama that occurred in our city in 2017," Baxter wrote to Wright. "Unfortunately, what we got was a transactional, unfocused, disengaged, dismissive bully."

The City Council has held numerous closed sessions to discuss Richardson's performance since the fall, including a four-hour meeting in October that followed a rescinded request for proposals regarding a planned consolidation of city and school administrative offices

In November, the Planning Commission voiced frustration over the process to draft the city's Capital Improvement Program this year, the first for Richardson in Charlottesville.

Richardson cleared a performance evaluation in December when he would have been up for a \$10,000 raise, which he declined.

Thursday evening, the Charlottesville local of the International Association of Firefighters issued a statement thanking the former chief for his service and pledging to continue serving the community.

“While we are disappointed that Chief Baxter is leaving, we are thankful for the guidance and the professionalism he has provided our department,” the statement reads. “It is not often that rank and file firefighters, associations and fire chiefs have the positive working relationship that were present under Chief Baxter’s watch, his leadership will be missed.”

Richardson appeared to withhold promotion for firefighter at center of budget battle

Nolan Stout

Jun 24, 2020

Charlottesville City Manager Tarron Richardson didn’t approve a promotion for the head of the city’s firefighter association, who has publicly battled him over funding issues.

Greg Wright, who was at the center of a heated budget battle before the coronavirus pandemic, was sworn in as a captain on May 29, according to a post on the department’s Twitter.

Wright was sworn in by former Fire Chief Andrew Baxter along with Jamie Shifflett, who was promoted to captain, and Scott Carpenter, who was promoted to battalion chief.

However, Wright's promotion didn't actually go through, according to city officials.

The city confirmed last week that Wright remains a firefighter while Shifflett is a captain and Carpenter is a battalion chief.

When asked why Wright's promotion no longer stood, city spokesman Brian Wheeler said, "All promotions of city employees involve approvals by the city manager."

Wheeler said the city would provide no further comment on Wright's promotion because it is a personnel matter.

However, according to spokesman Tyler Hawn, and confirmed by the Charlottesville Police Department's general orders, the police department's promotions are approved by the police chief.

CFD follows a rigorous promotion process that involves testing, certifications, interviews and vetting from inside and outside of the department before a field of people eligible for promotion are sent to the fire chief.

Wright declined to discuss the matter last week.

Wright is president of the Charlottesville local of the International Association of Firefighters. The group does not hold the same protections of a typical labor union, because Virginia has not allowed public employees to unionize. The General Assembly passed a law this

year, which takes effect July 1, that allows public employees to form unions.

Wright drew the ire of Richardson earlier this year in a battle over staffing for the fire department, which eventually **led to Baxter's resignation earlier this month.**

Richardson's administration has been plagued with allegations of aggression, misconduct and mismanagement, according to city staff, who did not want to be named. In his 13-month tenure, city leadership has been gutted of longtime employees.

Since May 20, the City Council has held multiple closed sessions to discuss Richardson's performance.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, firefighters were lobbying the city to approve a departmental request for **\$1.3 million to fund 12 new firefighters** to staff ambulances for a department that is stretched thin.

Firefighters donning yellow shirts showed up at budget meetings and made media appearances to discuss the issues.

Richardson has called the staffing problem "**an issue I inherited**" and said the fire chief needs to better allocate staff.

In late February, Wright emailed the general City Council email address, which is also seen by other officials and Richardson, "imploring" the council to hold meetings between Richardson and Baxter to address the issues.

Wright's email, and others sent by Baxter, emphasize communication problems with Richardson when discussing staffing and the department's deployment model.

Wright's email called Richardson "willfully ignorant" with a "complete lack of a basic understanding" that "cannot be tolerated" as the budget process moves forward.

In response, Richardson directly addressed Wright.

"You are a firefighter who oversees a limited number of employees on a daily basis. Your educational achievements and certifications, as well as your limited work experience as a supervisor will never be a match to any of my qualifications or credentials," wrote Richardson, who holds a doctorate. "So, let's be clear about who is ignorant and overwhelmingly shallow as a professional in the field of public administration."

Richardson wrote that Wright's "failure to understand the basics" of departmental budgeting is "egregious being that you have been working in your capacity for such a long time." According to city salary lists, Wright was hired in 2011.

Richardson wrote that Wright has no authority to request meetings with the City Council and told him to "gain a better understanding about your role and responsibilities as a firefighter."

Wright has defended his email, while Richardson said the language was racially charged.

Baxter told Wright over email that Richardson's response was "egregious."

“Many of us in senior leadership roles in our city were genuinely looking forward to new leadership after the chaos and drama that occurred in our city in 2017,” Baxter wrote to Wright. “Unfortunately, what we got was a transactional, unfocused, disengaged, dismissive bully.”

Baxter declined to comment. The city also declined further comment on the apparent dispute.

A next step for Wright could be filing a legal grievance. The Progress is not aware of any court filings at this time.

Although the Charlottesville local association is not a union, it has backing from the Virginia Professional Firefighters Association and the International Association of Firefighters, which could potentially provide Wright assistance if requested.

Another closed council session is scheduled for Thursday, but staff have not yet said what matters will be discussed there.

Grant funding paves way for city to hire 15 firefighters, but opens old wounds

Nolan Stout

Sep 23, 2020

It should have been cause for celebration, but instead reignited simmering flames around the city's fire department.

On Friday, U.S. Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine announced that the city had received \$3.5 million through the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant program.

The money will be used to hire 15 firefighters over three years, a welcome reprieve to a department stretched thin to keep ambulances operating among rising calls for service. Typically, it would have required a local match, but that was waived because of the coronavirus pandemic.

But the funding dredged up old disputes between the city's former fire chief and outgoing City Manager Tarron Richardson.

The grant was announced by the senators on Friday and, during Monday's City Council meeting, Richardson said it was his leadership that led to the funding. He lauded the financial savings to the city while lambasting local media coverage of his tenure and leadership decisions of Former Fire Chief Andrew Baxter.

"[The grant] saved taxpayer dollars by providing us with funding for 15 firefighters," he said during the meeting. "But by reporting this story in that manner, it would change the narrative of what [The Daily Progress] has continuously tried to do, which is portray me in a negative light."

Richardson announced his resignation earlier this month, effective Sept. 30. He will receive a lump-sum severance payout of \$205,000, equivalent to one year's salary, and have city health insurance for another year.

“The SAFER Act award for 15 personnel will allow us to maintain sufficient staffing on fire apparatus, while also adequately staffing the needed daily medical transport units,” Interim Fire Chief Emily Pelliccia said in a statement. “This additional staffing will allow the department to be less reliant on overtime to meet the current system demands, which should reduce department expenses as well as the fatigue and stress on our personnel, which is a real problem right now.

Baxter and city documents contradict Richardson’s characterization during the meeting of personnel needs in the department and the grant process.

Baxter resigned in the summer over his disputes with Richardson over the future of the department.

Early in his tenure, one of Richardson’s concerns was ballooning overtime costs in the department. Firefighters have struggled to keep up as calls for coverage have increased but staffing levels haven’t risen.

Baxter said in the early days of Richardson’s tenure, he told the new city manager that the department could make do with 12 new firefighters to address staffing shortages. The proposal would have cost \$1.3 million, but Baxter said it would have saved money in the long run.

However, Richardson suggested Monday that Baxter wanted to hire 15 positions all at once during the current fiscal year. Richardson said he wanted to find funding from other sources than the general fund and had proposed hiring three firefighters a year over five years.

In a later interview, Richardson said that the department was fluctuating between a request for nine and 15 positions, with 15 being the highest number.

Richardson said Monday that he told Baxter to find other funding options for the personnel or, alternatively, he would support funding three firefighters a year over five years.

In response, Baxter said “He’s lying.”

“He never once had a conversation with me about phasing in firefighters,” he said. “That’s a complete fabrication.”

Baxter contends that Richardson only supported adding staff in any capacity once there was “public pressure” from the firefighters union.

“The only time he ever engaged with me in a discussion about staffing that was not him telling me to shut down an engine company or ‘you’re never going to get nine firefighters,’ it was at the public budget session when all the firefighters were there in their yellow T-shirts,” Baxter said Tuesday.

At that work session, Richardson said he was focused on shifting resources to address staffing issues and was not in support of adding positions immediately.

“What I’m saying is that is a lot of money all at once, but if you do it progressively over time, we can be able to get to certain places,” he said at the meeting. “But doing it all at once — you know and I know that’s not realistic — but we can look at a plan for us to move forward.”

Richardson disputes Baxter’s characterization.

“It wasn’t about public pressure, I didn’t have any public pressure to add firefighters,” he said on Wednesday. He also pointed out an ongoing push to hire more positions during the tenures of former City

Manager Maurice Jones and former Interim City Manager Mike Murphy that weren't met.

When Richardson unveiled his initial budget proposal, it did not include any funding for increased staffing. After the budget was cut to account for the pandemic, no new positions were included.

Richardson acknowledged Wednesday that before the pandemic he had planned to start phasing in new positions in fiscal 2022, which starts July 1, 2021.

City spokesman Brian Wheeler said that Richardson has "repeatedly" told Pelliccia that he would support three positions if the money was available after the full impact of the pandemic on the fiscal 2020 budget was known.

Mayor Nikuyah Walker said during the meeting on Monday that the council was open to restructuring the department, but she didn't agree with Richardson's characterizations of the request for more personnel.

"What I want to say, from a council perspective, at least from my memory, including the conversations that I had with you, I don't think anyone was requesting that you hire all of those individuals at one time from my recollection, at least I was not," she said.

In a later interview, Richardson agreed with Walker's statement.

"The council wasn't asking for it all at once, it was Baxter who was asking for it all at once," he said. "I think they understood the budget implications if we funded it all at once."

Baxter's concerns during the budget process were centered around what he felt was Richardson's push to reduce overtime costs at the

expense of services and lack of understanding for emergency responses. He detailed his concerns with Richardson in his resignation letter.

One of the key focal points in the early budget process was an allegation that Richardson wanted to shut down an engine crew. Richardson denied the claim at the time and this week said it was Baxter's idea, not his.

Baxter provided The Daily Progress with audio recordings of several meetings he held with Richardson.

During one of the recorded meetings, Richardson continuously asks Baxter how to maintain its current level of service if the department needed to make large cuts or was short on staff.

“What would be the option for the coverage if you had to get rid of an engine company?” Richardson asked Baxter at a January meeting, according to a recording of the conversation.

When Baxter said that the reduction wouldn't be safe for the community or firefighters, Richardson said, “I don't think it's less safe.”

“I understand that sometimes we have to reduce service. If you didn't have a specific engine but you still had three stations to cover and didn't have people who had the capability of covering those staffing things, sometimes you've got to do that. Sometimes you have to do that,” he said. “It's not the best practice that we would want but sometimes you have to think about it in that way. And I'm saying that if you had to think about it that way, what would you do as fire chief?”

Richardson said during the meeting in question, the conversation with Baxter focused on solutions if the department was understaffed on certain shifts and unable to provide firefighters for all its apparatus. He said it was not a push to reduce funding.

“When he said it wouldn’t be safe for the firefighters, what I was saying if you don’t have enough personnel to cover a place or shift, look at it holistically,” he said.

In a recording of a March meeting, Richardson said “If we can’t get some other men in right away, what are the other options? All I keep getting is men, men, men.”

To support Richardson’s assertion that Baxter suggested pulling an engine crew, Wheeler provided a memo authored by Baxter in early March with a plan to cut overtime costs. The memo says that the department could remove Fire Medic 1 from the Ridge Street firehouse and Fire Medic 10 from the Fontaine Avenue station.

However, the memo was only authored after Richardson sent a formal letter to Baxter requesting a written plan-of-action. The letter, obtained this summer through the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, says that Baxter became “very combative” during previous meetings about reducing overtime.

According to emails provided by the city, the grant proposal moved forward in late April, well after it was clear that Richardson was not going to increase staffing. Richardson said the grant is an example of fiscal-minded leadership, saying it was only possible through his direction for Baxter to find other funding sources.

Baxter, however, said that the SAFER grant was his idea, not Richardson’s.

“For him to characterize this as something he was aware of, that’s not true. That’s another lie,” Baxter said. “He is trying to, in my view, salvage his reputation for his next city manager job. ... He can have his own opinion, but he doesn’t get his own set of facts.”

The city wasn’t the only one to receive funding from the grant program. Albemarle County was awarded \$1.9 million and will use the funds to cover 10 positions in Crozet and Pantops.

After Richardson’s statement during Monday’s council meeting, Councilor Heather Hill shifted the conversation to the benefits of the grant.

“Getting this type of grant is very important,” she said. “I think that everyone is very excited about the opportunities this can provide our fire department. I’m going to leave it at that.”