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George B. McGill

**CITY ADMINISTRATOR**

Carl Geffken

**CITY CLERK**

Sherri Gard

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Ward 1 – Jarred Rego

Ward 2 – Andre' Good

Ward 3 – Lavon Morton

Ward 4 – George Catsavis

At-Large Position 5 – Robyn Dawson

At-Large Position 6 – Kevin Settle

At-Large Position 7 – Neal Martin

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# **AGENDA**

**Fort Smith Board of Directors**

## **STUDY SESSION**

**March 9, 2021 ~ 6:00 p.m.**

**Fort Smith Convention Center**

**55 South 7<sup>th</sup> Street**

**Exhibit Halls A1 & A2**

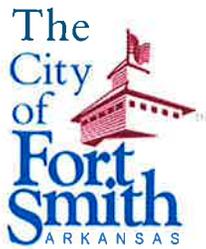
***THIS MEETING IS BEING TELECAST LIVE AT THE FOLLOWING LINK:***

<https://video.ibm.com/channel/XqbsvFPFApS>

### **CALL TO ORDER**

1. Discussion regarding riverfront development ~ *Martin/Morton placed on future study session at the January 5, 2021 regular meeting ~ (Administration)*
2. Discuss structure and funding of the Citizen Services Call Center ~ *Requested at the December 15, 2020 regular meeting ~ (Utility)*
3. Review preliminary agenda for the March 16, 2021 regular meeting

### **ADJOURN**



SS1

TO: Board of Directors

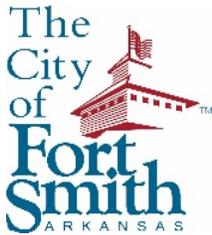
FROM: Carl E. Geffken, City Administrator *Carl*

DATE: March 9, 2021

SUBJECT: Riverfront Development

At the January 5, 2021 Study Session, Directors Martin and Morton, requested to have a discussion regarding riverfront development. Over the past five years, the Marshals Museum, the Riverfront Bike and Skate Park, and the Greg Smith River Trail have been built and the City has purchased 312 acres as part of a public-private partnership to build soft trails.

There is additional development on the horizon and the City is investing in infrastructure to incentivize that development. The infrastructure includes water and sewer lines and the extension of Kelley Highway to Riverfront Drive. In addition, ARDOT is scheduling work to improve Riverfront Drive/Highway 255.



**UTILITY DEPARTMENT**  
**INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Carl E. Geffken, City Administrator  
**FROM:** Lance A. McAvoy, Utility Director *LAM*  
**SUBJECT:** Budget Justification for Additional Staff for Program 5520  
**DATE:** March 3, 2021  
**CC:** Jeff Dingman, Deputy City Administrator

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During the December 15, 2020 Board of Directors' Meeting, the Department was instructed to present the need and justification for additional full time staff for customer service. This discussion is scheduled for the March 9, 2021, Board of Directors' Study Session. This memorandum highlights some of the history and justification as to why the Department is requesting the additional staff.

**History**

The Utility Department began operating a call center in February 2019 to address the additional call volume related to the transition to the new billing software. The decision was made to create a customer call center using temporary staff to answer incoming customer calls. It became apparent soon after starting the call center that the efficient handling of phone calls required temporary staff to have access to the billing system to create accounts, update specific customer information, and complete transfers or disconnections. However, since the temporary staff are not City employees, we could not grant them access for security reasons. This means that all other customer service functions needed to be handled by City employees. If the call center were staffed with City employees, the employees would be able to answer calls and address all issues without having to transfer the call, resulting in better customer service. For over two years the Department has operated the call center to help the citizens inquire about their bills and recently, has served other departments handle their customer calls.

**Locations**

Currently the Department's Customer Service Representatives are located at 623 Garrison Avenue, 801 Carnall Avenue, and the Drive-Thru at 517 Rogers Avenue. The Garrison Avenue location provides space for three windows where customers may pay their bills, and three windows to allow customers to set-up new accounts or inquire in-person on their account. The Rogers Avenue Drive-Thru provides three lanes for customers to pay their bills. The Carnall Avenue location houses the "Call Center" where customer calls are received. Currently the Department struggles with fully staffing both Garrison and the Drive-thru with its current full time staff. Attrition, illness, vacation, and other staffing issues have made it problematic for the Department to keep both sites open.

## **Restructuring 5520**

In 2021 the Department restructured the Customer Service Program (Program 5520) to segregate some of the job duties to reduce the risk of possible conflict of interests that were identified by the Internal Auditor and could have been an issue with the external audits. This included having the Utility Billing Manager moved from Garrison where this position had been over cashiering, to Carnall where the position only works to run and process the utility bills (which includes water, sewer, and solid waste bills). The position of Cashier and Customer Service Representative was merged into one position and current staff members are being cross trained to allow better staff utilization to provide coverage during vacations, staff turnover, illness, etc. Although this has provided greater flexibility, the need for additional FTE to aid in addressing the customer service needs still exists.

## **Analysis**

Last year the call center received 84,501 calls and was able to handle 73,448 of those calls. This is the equivalent of 1,475 calls per week, or 295 calls per day. The average time of each call was two and one half minutes. This also means a total of 11,053 calls were not handled (abandoned) which is the equivalent of 13%. It is important to note these calls were handled by six to eight temporary staff at the call center. By utilizing the temporary call center staff, the full time staff were able to handle the face-to-face interactions, processed mailed in payments, and also worked to answer customers' email questions. Without additional staff to handle the calls, those calls would have been handled by a total of five Customer Service Representatives who also handle face-to-face interactions with the customers at the Garrison Avenue location. With an average call handle time of two and one half minutes, many calls would have gone unanswered and customers would have been queued out the door on a daily basis especially during Covid-19 pandemic.

## **Water Shut-Off**

The end of this month (March 2021) the Department will begin shutting off water meters for those customers who have not paid their bills. This will be the first time in a year that shut-offs have been performed. Having additional customer service representatives to set-up payment plans, take calls to reconnect water service, and handle general questions related to the shut-off process will be vital to providing customers the service to which they have become accustomed.

## **Comparison to National Standards**

The American Water Works Association publishes Utility Benchmarking: Performance Management of Water and Wastewater on a regular basis. The latest edition also provided benchmarks on how customers prefer to place inquiries and receive answers. For utility/municipalities the size of Fort Smith, 77% prefer using the phone to ask questions and receive answers, 11% prefer in-person interaction, 5% use e-mail, 2% follow social media, and 5% was listed as other means.

During 2020 the Department utilized an average of seven temporary staff in the call center. Roll-over calls were also answered by staff at Garrison Avenue which allowed for a total average of nine potential call takers.

The table below provides a comparison of three benchmarks and how it compares with last year's actual numbers for the City of Fort Smith.

<b>Benchmark</b>	<b>AWWA 75th Percentile</b>	<b>AWWA Median</b>	<b>AWWA 25th Percentile</b>	<b>Fort Smith</b>
Average Talk Time (Minutes)	2.8	3.7	4.9	2.5
Abandoned Calls (% of total calls)	3.5%	6.5%	11.7%	13.1%
Average Calls per Call Center Rep (# of calls/yr)	6,303	3,782	2,419	8,161

The higher calls per Customer Service Representative is one reason the abandoned rate might be higher than expected. Additionally, the need to hand off a customer to a full-time employee to resolve or meet the customer’s needs may also explain the lower average talk time.

**Proactive Customer Service**

Currently the Department is utilizing the temporary employees in the call center to make proactive customer service contact. This includes making outbound phone calls and sending emails to customers that were found to have a large increase in their water usage. The effort is to communicate the usage spike to the customer before they receive their bill. In most of these cases, we have helped the customer identify water leaks on their property. This proactive service has reduced water loss and customer feedback has been positive. We have received more customer compliments in the recent months due to this proactive approach.

The approach also includes customer call back with inspection results. In the past, when Customer Service Representatives scheduled a meter inspection on behalf of a customer, the customer was asked to call back in three business days for results. Currently, the additional temporary staff allows the Department to call the customer back with the inspection results within one to two business days.

The call center employees have also made outbound calls to inactive customer accounts with outstanding bills in 2019 and 2020 to encourage these past customers to pay their outstanding balances before sending them to collections.

**Other Department Support**

In October 2020 the rate and schedule changed and additional carts were offered by the City’s Solid Waste Department. In preparation for an increased call volume to Solid Waste, a support measure was planned between Solid Waste, ITS and Utility. The employee base at Solid Waste would not be able to answer the increase of incoming calls due to the recent changes, and to handle the projected increase in call volume to Solid Waste, ITS setup a roll over call routing to forward specific Solid Waste extensions to the call center. Since October 5, 2020, the call center has taken over many of the calls for Solid Waste. Processes were put in place for Solid Waste employees to perform their duties and responsibilities with communication from call center staff. Most of these calls would not have been answered if we did not support a roll over project.

Four other City Departments have expressed a need and opportunity for call center support. These departments include Parks, Streets, Purchasing, and Finance. These departments would include an additional 170-200 calls per day. The majority of these calls could be handled by the call center with a minimal number needing to be transferred to the selective department. By routing these calls through the additional Customer Service Representatives, these department employees would be able to focus on their primary duties and responsibilities.

### **Budget Request**

In the 2021 budget, the Department requested funds to add additional Customer Service Representatives and a supervisor to continue to provide these and additional services. Although the request may have been seen as adding staff for a permanent call center, the proposed additional staff would be utilized for more than just taking and directing calls to the proper person. The additional FTEs would operate as Customer Service Representatives and would be utilized where they are needed (i.e. taking payment at Garrison or the Drive-Thru, setting-up accounts at Garrison, or taking calls in the call center.) As full time employees of the City, the new Customer Service Representatives would also be able to perform functions that only City staff may perform. Additionally the ability to rotate cross-trained staff would aid in preventing “burn-out” and provide a tool for employee retention.

The Department has evaluated the actual needs and is asking for seven additional FTE. This request is comprised of a Customer Service Manager, and six Customer Service Representatives. This is the same request as was submitted in the additional needs section of the 2021 budget.

To date in 2021, the call center has handled 1,421 calls per week and has had an abandoned percentage of 24.9%. This is the number of calls taken and does not include the expected increase in call volume once shut-offs are reinstated. There is no reason to believe the number of calls will decrease as citizens and customers have come to rely on the 784-2262 number as a point of contact with the City.

### **Conclusion**

One of the City of Fort Smith’s future initiatives, as identified by the City Administrator and Board of Directors, is to improve and provide exceptional customer service. The City can accomplish this, in part, by investing in additional FTE and empowering the employees to perform the essential customer service duties and responsibilities.

If additional positions are not approved, adequate staffing will not be available to continue our efforts in proactive customer service and other department support. There will be challenges to staff adequately all the locations to ensure proper support for our expanding customer service footprint, and it will potentially have a negative impact in the ability to fulfill the expectation of exceptional customer service.

Please contact me should you have any questions or need additional information.



March 2, 2021

TO: Members of the Board of Directors  
Members of the Fort Smith Municipal Employees Benevolent Fund Board of Advisors

RE: Appointments

Wendy Mathis of the Fort Smith Municipal Employees Benevolent Fund Board of Advisors will resign her position March 26, 2021. In accordance with Ordinance No. 2926 applications for this prospective vacancy are now being received. Applicants must be a city employee.

Please submit applications to the city administrator's office no later than the close of business on April 6, 2021. A list will be compiled for review by the Board of Directors. Applications are available on the City of Fort Smith website. Go to [www.fortsmithar.gov](http://www.fortsmithar.gov) and click on boards and commissions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Carl E. Geffken". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Carl E. Geffken  
City Administrator

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March 9, 2021 study session