

Super Neighborhood Alliance
Minutes from Meeting held March 11, 2019, at City Hall Annex



Guests

Teresa Geisheker, Planning Dept.
Rhonda Sauter, DON-COH
Jack Valinski, DON-COH
Vivien Nguyen, COH
Alyce Coffey, COH-SWM
Veronica Baxter Lamb, H-GAC
Abner Lyons, State Rep. H. Dutton
Jacqueline Smith, FEMA
Margaret Dunlap, METRO
Daphne Scarborough, Richmond Ave.
Greg Meyers, District C Candidate
Shelley Kennedy, District C Candidate
Matt Dulin, Community Impact Newspaper

Super Neighborhood Representatives

Philip Salerno, SNC 05
Ricky Miller, SNC 05
Priscilla T. Graham, SNC 06
James Thibodeaux, SNC 06
LaTisha Grant, SNC 06
Mark Klein, SNC 12
Leigh Killgore, SNC 14
Pedro Ayaragoitia, SNC 15
Randy Jones, SNC 16
Jack O'Connor, SNC 17

Michael Huffmaster, SNA Past Chair, SNC 18
Jane West, SNA Secretary, SNC 22
Mike Van Dusen, SNC 22
Stacie Fairchild, SNC 22
Mark Fairchild, SNC 22
Kay Warhol, SNC 24
Doug Smith, SNC 25
Terry Cominski, SNC 31
Cheryl Palmer O'Brien, SNC 32
Marcy Williams, SNC 36
Sylvia Rivas, SNC 36
Cindy Chapman, SNA Chairwoman, SNC 37
Jeff Peters, SNC 38
Linda Scurlock, SNC 39/40
Bessie Mansfield, SNC 39/40
Ivory Mayhorn, SNC 47
Juan Antonio Sorto, SNA Vice-Chairman, SNC 49/50
Albert Coleman SNC 49/50
Rob Block, SNC 51
Bridget Murray, SNC 57
Jim Honey, SNC 62
Amy Dinn, SNC 64/88
Kathleen O'Reilly, SNC 66
Leroy West, SNC 71
Tomaro Bell, SNC 83

Meeting called to order at 6:40 p.m.

I. Introductions

II. Acceptance of Minutes from Meeting Held on February 11, 2019

D. Smith moved and C. O'Brien seconded acceptance of the Feb. 11, 2019, meeting minutes. Motion carried.

III. Officers' Reports - Written Report(s)

The following written reports were available in print form: Bicycle Advisory Committee and Planning and Development Minimum Lot Size and Minimum Building Line (Mike Van Dusen); Infrastructure (M. Klein and M. Huffmaster); and Advisory Committee Reports (M. Huffmaster). Environmental and Transportation Reports were submitted too late to be distributed at the meeting and are attached hereto. Jane West announced that the SNA is planning to conduct two training sessions, one of which will be held on Saturday, March 30th at the HPD Southwest Substation at 13097 Nitida Street, Houston, TX 77045; the other

will be held on a date and at a location yet to be determined but most likely Saturday, April 27th). The training will be the same at both events and will include tips for running meetings and organizations, and fundamentals of planning.

IV. Presentation: Houston Fire Department Chief Samuel Pena

Chief Pena began by stating that his presentation would have two parts: (1) discussion of HFD's deployment model; and (2) discussion of Proposition B. Chief Pena began by addressing changes that he hopes to implement to HFD's deployment model. HFD has been working under the "All Hazards" strategy which focuses simply on response time; the goal is for first responders to arrive on the scene in 6.5 minutes or less regardless of the type of unit that responds. Referring to that model as the "Cadillac" model, he said that Houston is only funded for a Hyundai. The "All Hazards" model means that more resources are deployed than needed. Eighty percent of the 911 calls received are basic life support calls, i.e., basic trauma, minor incidents. Calls requiring advanced cardiac life support are a relatively small percent of calls received. Approximately 25% of calls are "frequent flyers," i.e., persons who use the 911 system three or more times in a year. For the most part these are people who don't need the most expensive transport to the most expensive service, i.e., a hospital emergency room. Nevertheless, under the "All Hazards" model, HFD assumes that all calls require the highest level of service. Most of the disconnect occurs when a call is answered. The dispatcher needs to determine the need within the first seconds: medical or other type of emergency. If medical, then the dispatcher must determine if the need is for basic life support or a cardiac emergency. Currently, all medical calls are all treated as the same level of emergency. Chief Pena gave an example of how more resources than needed are often deployed to a call for service; i.e., he witnessed an accident downtown, the person involved declined service, but the Chief called for a response just to be sure and multiple vehicles arrived just to document that the person involved in the accident refused medical services. HFD is seeking ways to become more efficient. On medical side, there are five call types: Jail-80% time they transport someone from the jail, first fire truck and then ambulance, the jail already has medical personnel, so it's a waiting game for ambulance; 12-15 minute thresh hold is one they don't want to cross. HFD has analyzed a year's worth of data from June 2017 to July 2018. In that time HFD received some 348,000 calls for service, 46,000 fire calls -- that includes every type of fire. Approximately 1,600 were fires at single family houses. Approximately 500 of the fire calls were calls that had to be upgraded to multiple alarms, i.e., they were significant fires. They are now trying to address the 1,600 calls that were low hazard. Fire calls currently require a response of up to 32 people just to insure that critical tasks can be performed. Sixty-eight percent of the time, the first responding unit is able to contain the fire. HFD is seeking a way to drop the initial response down to 20 people, the minimum accepted standard is 17 people. Of course, the incident commander can always upgrade the alarm to require a 32-person response. This would happen for example if the first truck pulled out of the station and saw a column of smoke, that's already a serious, full-fledged fire, not an incipient, fire, so that's the type of fire for which the call would be upgraded immediately. The goal is to provide efficiency to the system and to leave the rest of the system able to respond to other call and not to reduce the number of available resources by sending them to calls where they are not needed.

Questions: D. Smith (SNC 25) asked, if HFD's goal is to respond to a house fire in 15 minutes? Chief Pena, said, "No, the goal for responding to house fires and to medical calls is 6.5 minutes." He explained that travel time is typically 4 minutes and there is a 60-second delay from the time a call is received to the time an emergency vehicle starts rolling.

T. Bell (SNC 83) asked what drivers should do when they see a fire vehicle behind them? Chief Pena urged drivers to pull to the right to allow emergency vehicles to pass on the left.

C. O'Brien (SNC 32) asked if there is a different response standard for an emergency in a highrise? Chief Pena responded that HFD strives to apply standards that are industry best practices, but that absent adoption by a regulatory agency, standards are just suggestions. He said that the National Fire Protection Association ("NFPA") sets response times and minimum number of responders. Some structures look like SFR but they have three tightly packed town houses next door; HFD relies on firefighters to know their territory. A full blown fire receives a standard box of 32 responders. A medium hazard fire such as in an open air mall, will garner fewer responders. Highrise buildings are high hazards and personnel sponges that require a lot of people to get equipment on the scene, up and ready to use.

J. O'Connor (SNC 17) asked how budget cuts will effect safety? Chief Pena said that HFD is not artificially creating a lack of capacity. There are 1,000 incidents per day on average that requires an HFD response. He said that HFD will never have enough firefighters to fully man all stations.

K. O'Reilly (SNC 66) asked what HFD is doing about false alarms in highrise buildings? She said that one of the highrise buildings in Museum Park experiences a false alarm at least once a month. Chief Pena responded that issue is governed by city ordinance and that beyond 4 per year, the city charges the building's management.

P. Ayaragoitia (SNC 15) asked if given the high number of medical calls that HFD receives, it would make sense to hire more paramedics and not to lay off paramedics before firefighters. Chief Pena responded that while house fires are decreasing due to improved building codes and safety measures, that house fires still occur, and that HFD must be able to respond to all of them with enough personnel to handle all of the critical tasks. He said that all fire trucks have EMTs on board and some have paramedics. Paramedics are important for critical medical emergencies such as cardiac arrest. Acknowledging that there is opportunity to look at how best to deploy the city's limited resources, he also acknowledged that he may have to choose between idling a fire truck or an ambulance in which case he would lean towards idling a fire truck.

M. Huffmaster (SNC 18) asked if HFD should be adding more ambulances to the fleet given the high number of medical calls being received? Chief Pena said, "Yes," explaining that in 2017 HFD was 70 ambulances short. HFD currently has 100 ambulances in the system, but they have to cover 640 square miles. Every ambulance added costs the city approximately \$1M to purchase and to staff.

M. Huffmaster (SNC 18) asked if HFD has redundant equipment? Chief Pena said that HFD currently staffs all of its equipment, and that he supports full staffing for every apparatus. He said while EMTs can respond in a pick up truck, an ambulance is needed to transport critical patients to the hospital. HFD has an annual budget of \$503,000,000; salary is the highest part of HFD's overhead. The system he came from did not fully staff every vehicle, but they sent more trucks to every fire to fully staff the fire. He said if there are 2 firefighters in the hazard zone, there must be 2 firefighters outside to respond to the 2 in the hazard zone if needed. Houston operates on an offensive strategy, that means Houston can start a rescue immediately upon arrival and not have to wait for back up. There are opportunities to streamline and change to make HFD's provision of services more efficient. But change isn't easy, change takes time, and he said that he was not going to suggest any indiscriminate changes or any changes that could not be evaluated as implemented.

J. Honey (SNC 62) asked if the number of fire stations was important and, if so, who decides how many there should be. He also asked about the number of calls for services received from vagrants, and if HFD was getting support to eliminate calls from frequent flyers? Chief Pena responded that "low acuity" calls are significant in number, i.e., approximately 25% of the calls are for basic life support. Sometimes callers only need instructions on how to take medicine. Sometimes the first responders are called to service the same individual twice in one shift. The federal grant being used to fund the sobering center is expiring. But he said that HFD is using an Emergency TeleHealth and Navigation Program ("ETHAN") to reduce the number of people being transported to area hospitals as a result of calls to 911. He said that once of the scene first responders evaluate the situation. Sometimes the patient may benefit from talking to a doctor and they may

not need a transport, just a prescription or advice. He said that it then falls to the health department to follow through to help insure that the patient doesn't become a frequent flyer but the navigation portion of the system has never worked as advertised because the only follow through has been a phone call due to the lack of resources. HFD knows the issues and knows the frequent flyers, but there is no significant link to needed social services, no synchronized response from nonprofits, and consequently the system is not functioning well. The issue is what can the city do to stop the rising call for services.

Terry Cominski (SNC 31) asked if ambulance personnel are paid differently from firefighters? Chief Pena said, "Yes," they have separate pay scales.

Proposition B: Asserting that Proposition B passed in November, Chief Pena acknowledged that people are wondering why it has not yet been implemented. He said the estimated increase in payroll is \$100M or approximately a 20% increase in his payroll budget. He said that Union put it into court by filing a lawsuit, the court initially issued a restraining order, but that order dissolved in November after the election, so the city is now working toward implementation which is not easy. In order to implement Prop B the city must first interpret what parity means as HFD has 59 wage types, and each firefighter has to be tested. Many people are being taken away from their regular jobs to do the work needed to implement Prop B. Last year HFD had 250 civilian employees, now HFD has only 108 civilian employees and these employees must work through a myriad of issues, e.g., employees must be tested, pay tables developed, and changes made to the systems used to execute payroll. The city's goal is to complete all the necessary steps by May 9th and to provide back pay to January 1st.

With back pay to Jan. 1st, the city's obligation for FY 2019 will be \$31,000,000 more than what was originally budgeted. Approximately \$20,000,000 will come from the city's fund balance, i.e., the funds that the city is obligated to maintain for such contingencies. That's the "band-aid" for FY 2019. For FY 2020 the projected deficit is over \$100,000,000 not counting Prop B. HFD is being asked to reduce its budget by \$25,000,000. Every other city department is being asked to reduce its budget by 3%, reductions that are expected to yield another \$40,000,000. Another \$10,000,000 is expected to come from growth allowed by the revenue cap on property taxes. Those initiatives still leave a significant deficit.

T. Bell (SNC 83) asked how many firefighters the city currently employs? Chief Pena said, 4,000. The requested cut in HFD's budget could require 379 firefighters to be laid off. Firefighters currently work four shifts. If nothing changes, that's approximately 100 firefighters per shift that will be lost. Such a cut would mean that at least one unit in every district will no longer be available. HFD is stretched thin. It's not new. Chief Pena's been working on the data since he arrived in Houston. Another possibility being studied is a move from four to three shifts. State law limits the amount of time that a firefighter can work to 46.7 hours in a 72 hour period.

Nine to ten times a year each firefighter has to be called back to raise the average amount of time worked. Without such "debit days" the average amount of time that firefighters work would be 42 hours per week. The three shift proposal would allow firefighters to work one on one off one on four off. In order to work that shift the city would have to let firefighters off one of every six shifts; to do that he has to keep an additional 17% staffing on every shift; every sixth shift, they're off an extra day to stay under the 46.7 hour threshold. There are 912 firefighters on every shift. HFD has to maintain a staffing level above that by about 15% due to the number of people who are off for one reason or another. In sum, moving from four to three shifts would mean that HFD would have fewer shifts but more people working each shift. Instead of 912 firefighters working on four shifts, there would be 1,138 firefighters working three shifts. Chief Pena said that he could absorb 240 positions and still fill every position needed to be filled, so by moving to three shifts that would be 240 that would not need to be laid off. He recognized, however, that 240 is still a long way from 378. He said that change would put HFD about 9 units down instead of 25 units down.

P. Ayaragoitia (SNC 15) asked if the Union would let HFD move from four to three shifts? Chief Pena responded that he has obligations to both the City of Houston and to the rank and file firefighters, but he must be able to support and maintain the firefighters and not just pay their salaries, he must also supply them equipment and training. Asserting that the fire stations are bursting at the seams and that HFD has a history of providing little professional development, Chief Pena said that this year is the first time in 9 years HFD has had a medical management class. He said that leadership, professional development, health, and safety have all been neglected. As examples he said that because fire stations don't have vehicle exhaust equipment soot permeates the stations when the trucks are running, and that even though cancer is an epidemic, HFD does not provide firefighters annual physicals and does not clean their gear. He said that HFD needs at least another \$150,000,000 per year to keep a force of 4,000 firefighters and provide these necessities. If restructuring can be used to attain efficiencies, that's great. Most people never use the services; but those that need it, need it. Houston is the third largest municipal Fire Department in the country. Los Angeles is about the same size as Houston, but has 100 stations and approximately 3,500 firefighters who work on average 56 hours per week. Houston firefighters work on average 46 hours per week and cannot work more because of state law. If the financial challenged posed by Prop B could be solved, Chief Pena said that he would invest in training and upgrading equipment. Many Houston fire trucks are over 10 years old.

D. Smith (SNC 25) observed he has heard the Chief say he could save approximately \$10,000,000 per year by reclassifying some personnel from classified to civilian, and asked if that process has been started? Chief Pena said that reclassifying employees is easier said than done because many are protected by civil service. Because the requirements of state law must be satisfied, reclassifying employees is not something that can be done readily because doing so would likely require changes to state law that applies only to cities the size of Houston. But he acknowledged that was a strategic approach that could possibly be used in the future. Chief Pena also said that because the classifications held by current employees are governed by ordinance, he said that any change in classification might only apply to new employees.

T. Bell (SNC 83) observed that because firefighters typically work only two days out of every four, that many have second full-time jobs. She asked if the move to three shifts would make it more difficult for firefighters to maintain a second job, was the Chief concerned that such a shift would cause veteran firefighters to leave? She also asked about challenges posed by the opioid addiction crisis. Chief Pena acknowledged that opioid addiction poses a problem and a challenge for our firefighters. He said that the price of pharmaceuticals for them has risen between 76-90% while his operating budget has remained flat, so the rising cost of prescription drugs has a big impact. On the issue of additional employment, he said that he is not focused on that issue. He said that HFD has over 350 firefighters with over 30 years experience, he expects attrition to increase with the rate of retirement. About 150 firefighters retire every year. If possible, Chief Pena said that he would like to absorb the changes required by Prop B through attrition and not have to layoff anyone. Given enough "runway" to implement Prop B., Chief Pena said that it would be possible to do through attrition without layoffs. If, however, he is forced to implement a Reduction in Force, then it will be last-in first-out. With time he said that HFD can deliver a more efficient fire department.

J. O'Connor (SNC 17) commented that Chief Pena was clearly paying attention to details, and asked if he felt like there would be problems going forward with friction between HPD and HFD? Chief Pena said that neither he nor HPD Chief Acevedo want there to be friction because friction would adversely effect the boots on the ground who depend on each other for their own safety. The last thing he wants is for this issue to cause a divide. He said that he is trying to provide solutions instead of adding fuel to the fire.

V. Old Business 2018 Survey

Past Chairman Michael Huffmaster reported that he is still working to collect and collate the surveys and urged representatives from all Super Neighborhood Councils to complete and submit a survey promptly.

VI. New Business: None

VII. Committee Reports: Moving to WRITTEN Reports.

A. Standing Committees

1. Liveability, Transportation and Parks: S. Ashy

2. Infrastructure: M. Klein (SNC 12) and M. Huffmaster (SNC 18) reported that there are three bills making their way through the Texas Legislature aimed at improving the delivery of disaster recovery funds to local governments on which SNCs may want to comment individually: **Senate Bill 6** would require the Texas Division of Emergency Management to create guides for local officials on both disaster response and recovery and how to manage debris removal. It also would require the division to establish a work group to study how best to train and credential local emergency management directors. **Senate Bill 7** would revamp a fund already administered by the Texas Water Development Board that helps pay for flood control projects. The new Texas Infrastructure Resilience Fund (“TIRF”), would contain four different pots of money totaling more than \$1.6 billion. One account would be to help Harvey-impacted communities with the so-called “matching funds” they need to secure billions more in federal recovery dollars. Another would help finance projects included in a statewide flood plan. **Senate Bill 8** would create an official statewide flood plan that would look much like the water development boards State Water Plan, which is published every five years. The plan —consisting of a list of flood control projects — also would be compiled by regions across the state that would manage different watersheds. The bill also calls for the creation of a 10-year plan to repair and maintain unsafe dams in the state. (Follow up note: these three bills were unanimously approved by the state senate on March 20th and moved to the Texas House of Representatives.)

M. Huffmaster also announced that Stephen Costello has convened the Redevelopment and Drainage Task Force which met on March 4th together with the Harris County Flood Control advisory committee. The focus of the meeting was a presentation on Atlas 14 -- NOAA’s update of rainfall data which shows that the 100-year storm event, i.e., a storm that has a 1% chance of occurring in any year. The new data increases the amount of rainfall for the 100-year event from 12+ inches to 16+ inches. This data is important because the city’s development standards are aimed at handling the 100-year storm event. M. Huffmaster and M. Klein are planning to meet with Stephen Costello in the near future.

3. Growth: J. Sorto

4. Health and Public Safety: T. Bell

5. Transition/Regulatory Affairs: J. West

6. Environmental/I-45: K. O’Reilly

7. Bicycle: M. Van Dusen

B. Advisory Committees - Moving to WRITTEN Reports

1. Houston Work Group: J. Sorto

2. Walkable Places: M. Huffmaster/J. West

3. Complete Communities: M. Huffmaster

4. H-GAC Mobility: S. Ashy

VIII. Open Comments (5 minutes)

Rhonda Sauter announced that she lost an employee who represented 10% of her staff. She stated that she's working with the city's IT team to get SNA materials on the website fully up to date.

T. Bell (SNC 83) reported that Red Cross has funds available for disaster relief for people who suffered damages amounting to \$17,000 or more.

J. Thibodeaux (SNC 06) announced that a affordable housing event will be held at Greenspoint Mall in the near future, details TBA.

M. Huffmaster (SNC 18) announced that County Judge Lina Hidalgo is holding a series of meetings throughout the county on various topics all of which offer an opportunity for public engagement. On March 23rd there will be such a meeting on flooding. Information about the meeting subjects, dates, times, and locations is available on the county judge's website: www.linahidalgo.com.

IX. Adjournment: 8:15 p.m.

Next meeting - April 8, 2019 (second Monday, monthly) at 6:30 PM, City Hall Annex