

CITY OF SEBASTOPOL CITY COUNCIL
AGENDA ITEM REPORT FOR MEETING OF: December 17, 2024

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To: Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers
From: Fire Ad Hoc Committee, Gold Ridge Fire Protection District, and City Administration
Subject: Consideration of Council Approval of the Sebastopol Fire Department Stipend Policy

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RECOMMENDATION:

The City Council approve the Sebastopol Fire Department Stipend Policy for volunteer firefighters, which will take effect on January 1, 2025. This item is for approval of the policy only. If the policy is approved at this Council meeting, City staff will return to the January 7, 2025 Council meeting with a recommendation for implementation of the policy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This agenda item highlights the need to update the Sebastopol Fire Department’s Stipend Policy to establish 24/7 coverage, enhancing city citizens' protection. Currently, limited coverage may lead to slower response times, particularly during overnight hours when volunteer availability can be unpredictable.

This updated policy will improve response times and help meet community expectations for continuous fire and emergency services. Additionally, the 24/7 coverage aligns with best practices in fire service standards, promoting a safer environment for residents and providing peace of mind that the department is always prepared to respond.

The new policy is also more consistent with the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District (GRFPD). This alignment will promote consistency for volunteer firefighters across both agencies, facilitating a smoother integration of personnel, reducing potential confusion, and supporting a unified approach to volunteer support and management.

The proposed Sebastopol Fire Department stipend policy reimburses volunteer firefighters for expenses incurred associated with services as follows:

- Each day is divided into five blocks—four three-hour daytime blocks and one overnight “sleeper” block of twelve (12) hours.
- Individual Block Stipend:
 - Daytime Block: Volunteers working any of the 3-hour daytime blocks receive \$40 per block.
 - Overnight Sleeper Block: Volunteers working the overnight block receive \$80.
- Volunteers who provide service for 24-hours receive a total stipend of \$240.

Under the contractual agreement with the GRFPD, the City of Sebastopol will manage the performance and pay administration for the volunteers.

BACKGROUND:

The Sebastopol Fire Department (SFD) is staffed by a contracted Fire Chief from GRFPD, two full-time 40-hour Fire Engineers, stipend volunteer firefighters, and one-half of an Administrative Assistant. SFD provides emergency response, fire inspections, fire prevention, fire investigation, and community support services to the citizens and businesses of Sebastopol.

Our 40-hour Fire Engineers work “four tens” and overlap on Thursdays for a two-person engine company. All other days of the week, a volunteer firefighter provides services to the City through a two-person company. This coverage leaves nights and holidays unstaffed, leading to delayed emergency responses during these times.

Currently, volunteers are reimbursed when they provide 8 hours of services during the day. Each volunteer is reimbursed \$200.00 per shift. The current stipend structure is as follows:

- 8-Hour Shift: \$200.00
- Calls: \$15.00 per call
- Drill/Training per event:
 - Firefighters: \$15.00
 - Captains: \$18.00
 - Chiefs: \$20.00

Calls are busiest between 9:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. However, citizens rely on the 9-1-1 system at all hours, including overnight, when the SFD is unstaffed and solely dependent on volunteer response. Though the SFD maintains a roster of 28 active volunteer personnel, several sources have identified and stated that the SFD has occasionally been deficient and unable to respond on time to calls for service. The January 3, 2023, Fire Department Feasibility Study Final Report identified a crew “turnout” time of 6:09 minutes for 90% of medical calls. In suburban communities, staffing in a station provides no longer than a 2:00 minute turnout time. With 24/7 coverage, supported by a revised stipend policy, we anticipate responders will save 4-minutes in crew turnout time which is significant in critical emergencies.

SFD turnout times reflect volunteer firefighter response, where members must travel to the fire station from home or work to gather the necessary equipment and respond to the emergency in a fire department vehicle. This deficiency does not reflect volunteer firefighter dedication, as our volunteers have consistently demonstrated their commitment to the citizens of Sebastopol.

The rising call volume is a significant issue affecting volunteer firefighters. In 2024, the SFD is expected to respond to around 1,500 calls—up 66.67% from 2003, when they handled approximately 900 calls. This substantial increase means volunteers are now called upon more frequently to respond to emergencies. Since most volunteers have full-time jobs outside of their fire department duties, this additional workload can be challenging to manage, leading to fatigue and potentially reducing availability. The increased demand places a strain on volunteers, who must balance their firefighting responsibilities with personal and professional commitments, impacting the department's ability to maintain a consistent, reliable response.

ANALYSIS:

Staff recommends approving the proposed City of Sebastopol Volunteer Firefighter Stipend Policy with an effective date of January 1, 2025.

The SFD relies heavily on its volunteer firefighters, who receive a nominal fee for food, uniforms, personal tools, and vehicle fuel. Creating and using a more similar stipend policy promotes consistency between the City of Sebastopol and the GRFPD agencies.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

This item has been noticed in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and was available for public viewing and review at least 72 hours before the scheduled meeting date.

FISCAL IMPACT:

ATTACHMENT 1:

**City of Sebastopol
Volunteer Firefighter
Stipend Policy**

1.0 Background:

The City of Sebastopol requires the services of volunteer firefighters to provide emergency response services to the community. Volunteer firefighters provide critical support during times of need for services. They provide initial responses to emergencies and other requests for services.

The City desires to recognize the value of the volunteers by providing them with equipment, support and training to allow them to make meaningful contributions to the City and the community.

Volunteers are not considered nor intended to be employees of the City, but rather individuals donating their time for public service with humanitarian objectives without expectation of pay and are therefore subject to different policies and procedures from those applicable to regular full-time employees.

2.0 Volunteer Program**2.1 Definitions**

For the purposes of this Volunteer Firefighter Stipend Policy, the following definitions shall apply:

- **24-Hour Service Stipend:** When a volunteer provides continuous service for 24-hours, the volunteer will receive a stipend of \$240.00 per 24-hour period of service.
- **Block Stipend:** When a volunteer provides continuous service for a designated block of 3 hours, the volunteer will receive a stipend of \$40.00 per 3-hour block.
- **Call Stipend:** When a volunteer responds to an incident or provides station standby coverage, the volunteer will receive a stipend of \$20.00 per call.
- **Drill Stipend:** When a volunteer attends a designated training at the fire house for more than one hour, the volunteer will receive a stipend of \$20.00 per training/drill.
- **Nominal Fee:** The sum of all stipends provided to a volunteer in a calendar year that does not exceed twenty percent (20%) of what the City would provide as a base salary to a full-time engineer on Step C of the City's approved salary schedule.
- **Sleeper Stipend:** When a volunteer provides continuous service for a 8, the volunteer will receive a stipend of \$80.00 per 8-hour block.
- **Volunteer or Volunteer Firefighter:** An individual who performs a service for the City without promise, expectation, or receipt of compensation for services. Volunteers may receive a nominal fee for their services and as reimbursement for their expenses. Services must be offered freely and without pressure or coercion, direct or implied. Services provided by a volunteer may not be of the same type which the individual is employed to perform for the City. Volunteers respond to calls for service or provide coverage at the firehouse. While at the firehouse, volunteers maintain a "Constant State of Readiness," prepared to respond to any emergency within one (1) minute.
- **Weekend Stipend.** When a captain-ranked volunteer is assigned and provides "on-call" services during a between 5:00 p.m. on Friday and 7:00 a.m. on Monday, the volunteer shall receive \$500.00 per weekend period. This stipend shall expire and no longer be offered or provided to volunteers effective June 30, 2025.

2.2 Rationale.

As described herein, the City provides a nominal fee/stipend to volunteers as reimbursement for approximate out-of-pocket expenses incurred by a volunteer that are incidental to providing volunteer firefighting services, including, but not limited to:

- Cost of meals
- Transportation expenses
- Uniform expenses (including reasonable cleaning expenses and replacement expenses)
- Tuition expenses
- Books, supplies, and other materials essential to volunteer training

2.3 Policy

Volunteers may receive the established stipends (24-Hour Service Stipend, Call Stipend, Drill Stipend, or Sleeper Stipend) to help offset volunteer expenses. Stipends are provided to volunteers who are ineligible to receive a regular salary or compensation in exchange for their services. Volunteers may not obtain regular employee status or benefits solely by volunteering with the City as a firefighter.

2.3.1 Stipend Limitations.

2.3.1.1 On an annual basis, no volunteer shall receive a nominal fee that exceeds twenty percent (20%) of a base salary to a full-time engineer on Step C of the City's approved salary schedule

2.3.1.2 Volunteers are not eligible to receive more than one stipend for services provided at one time. For example, a volunteer who receives a 24-Hour Service Stipend and attends a Drill during the same 24-hour period, will not receive a Drill Stipend. A volunteer who provides 3-hour block services and receives a Block Stipend and also responds to a service call during the same time period, will not receive a Call Stipend. A volunteer who receives an on-call weekend stipend is not eligible to receive any other stipends during the correlating weekend period. These examples are demonstrative and do not constitute a comprehensive list of potential scenarios wherein a volunteers stipends would be limited.

2.4 Workers' Compensation Insurance

The City will provide Workers' Compensation Insurance for all volunteer firefighters, per applicable State and federal laws.

2.5 Reporting

All stipends will be reported to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) on a Form 1099.

2.6 CalOES or ABH Services

Volunteers may be paid as temporary, hourly employees, without losing their volunteer status, on an occasional or sporadic basis for infrequent, irregular events on an emergency basis, such as a CalOES or ABH event. At the conclusion of the emergency event, the impacted individual's employment shall be terminated and volunteer status reinstated.

ATTACHMENT 2:

Gold Ridge Fire Stipend Timecard

NAME: _____ MONTH / YEAR: _____

STA # _____

DAY	FST	FSL	INT	Misc
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				

DAY	FST	FSL	INT	Misc	
17					
18					
19					
20					
21					
22					
23					
24					
25					
26					
27					
28					
29					
30					
31					
TOTAL	-	-	-	-	0.0

FF Stipend (OST)	-	X	\$40	=	\$ -
FF Sleeper (OSL)	-	X	\$80	=	\$ -
Intern (INT)	-	X	\$240	=	\$ -
Misc. Hourly Pay (Misc)	-			=	\$ -
			Total Amount:		\$ -
Description of Misc. hrs. worked _____					

1 STIPEND CREDIT = 3 HOUR BLOCK
1 INTERN CREDIT = 24 HOUR BLOCK
24 Hour Stipend Block = 4 Stipend Credits and 1 Sleeper Credit

Please enter the TOTAL number of completed CREDITS per day under the appropriate Rank/Job column.

Volunteer Signature: _____ Date: _____
 Dept. Chief Approval: _____ Date: _____

ALL TIMECARDS MUST BE SIGNED BY THE VOLUNTEER & STATION BC AND TURNED IN BY THE 3rd WORK PERIOD: 1st THRU 31st - PAID ON 10th OF FOLLOWING MONTH

Explanation of timecard:

The stipend structure is designed to compensate volunteer firefighters based on the number and type of “shifts” they work within a 24-hour period. Here’s how it works:

- Full 24-Hour Shift: Volunteers who work an entire 24-hour shift receive a total stipend of \$240.
- Shift Structure: Each day is divided into five blocks—four daytime blocks of three hours each and one overnight “sleeper” block.
- Individual Block Stipend:
 - Daytime Block: Volunteers working any of the 3-hour daytime blocks receive \$40 per block.
 - Overnight Sleeper Block: Volunteers working just the overnight block receive \$80.

Volunteers who work all five blocks (covering the full 24 hours) receive a \$240 stipend reimbursement. This system allows volunteers to contribute their time in flexible ways while being fairly compensated based on hours worked.