



Mayor Sam Kooiker, and Rapid City Common Council  
300 6<sup>th</sup> Street  
Rapid City, SD 57701

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JAN 20 2015

MAYOR'S OFFICE

January 17, 2015

Dear Elected Officials:

This letter is concerning the upcoming ordinance proposal that would name the Rapid City Fire Department as the exclusive provider of Aircraft Rescue and Firefighting (ARFF) services at the Rapid City Regional Airport. If I understand the issue correctly, the ordinance would prohibit any current or future effort to seek an outside contractor for ARFF services at the airport. I stand in opposition to contracting for those services, and I'd appreciate it if you would allow me to offer my qualified opinion on this issue. I was employed by the RCFD from April 1979 through April 2010, and during my career I served as a reliever at the airport fire station, a trainer for ARFF, a responder to airplane crashes and other incidents at the airport, and finally as a battalion chief with incident command duties and responsibilities.

First, I would submit that all RCFD firefighters assigned to the airport bring with them a knowledge base and skill set that is highly unlikely to be matched by a low-bid contract employee. Each RCFD firefighter has several strong years of emergency response experience under the belt by the time the Department would even consider him/her for an ARFF specialty assignment. They are taught to thrive in an organizational culture that requires:

- dedication to public service
- peak physical and mental performance under adverse conditions and circumstances
- demonstrated proficiency and experience in –
  - fighting fires in structures
  - emergency medical triage, treatment, and transport
  - rescue and extrication (car crashes, industrial accidents, etc.)
  - wildland firefighting
  - hazardous materials detection and mitigation
  - emergency vehicle operation
  - equipment and tool operation, maintenance, re-servicing, and troubleshooting
- a full understanding and compliance with the standardized methods, tactics, strategies, action plans, and safety practices through which emergency and non-emergency incidents are managed.

I reiterate – at a minimum they bring this skill set, knowledge base, and these proficiencies to the airport before they begin training in the ARFF specialty. While it would be difficult to try and quantify what this training and experience is worth – suffice it to say, if these qualifications were stipulated by contract, they would most likely render such a contract financially unviable.

Next, I wonder if consideration has been given to the other “value-added” advantages of the RCFD providing firefighting and EMS services to the airport? Dispatch services are currently paid for, and if I have my facts straight, any contractor would have to negotiate their own service fee for dispatch and communications services. As it stands now, by way of the RCFD the dispatch center provides full-time technical support for communication software and hardware, which is absolutely essential for such a complex radio system to remain dependable, and in compliance with FAA regulations.

In addition, a fulltime truck mechanic and mechanic’s helper are provided by the RCFD to work on the airport crash trucks. So you understand – these mechanics do much more than service the motors, drive trains, brakes, etc. – they are trained to work on this specialized type of equipment, and have years of experience with fire pumps, foam proportioners, electronics, and all the various subsystems essential in delivering aircraft rescue and firefighting capability. Of all the firefighting equipment in inventory, ARFF equipment above all must work flawlessly and dependably every time – there is an incredibly small window of opportunity to save lives upon initial fire attack in a plane crash situation – the equipment must not fail.

Furthermore, there is a “deep bench” of personnel with ARFF expertise within the ranks of the RCFD. Over the years, a goodly number of firefighters have rotated through the specialty either as airport assigned, or airport relievers. Many have been promoted to officer and chief officer positions, which is an extraordinary advantage when determining the strategies, tactics, and action plans that must be quickly developed to meet the challenge of an aircraft crash response.

The RCFD enjoys productive and cooperative relationships with other emergency response agencies. Whether fire or law enforcement; county, state, or federal, these are sound working relationships that have been proven over the long haul. These associations take a lot of time, effort, and resources to build – they don’t happen overnight. Just as in every other enterprise or human endeavor, it is critical to know the quickest way to engage the most suitable and capable help available. Emergency service operations depend on the personal and professional relationships that we establish with other people “in the business.” I think the airport loses that on day one with the for-profit focus of a contractor.

While I have no direct experience with contractors, I am familiar with the common scenarios as told by others in the fire service. Contractors come in with a low bid knowing they will lose money in the short-term, only to make it up with incremental increases in the long-term. Meanwhile, the supporting systems that were in place when the original municipal department provided the service will simply fade away. That investment will be lost, and if the contractor pulls out (which they will do once the contract is no longer profitable) those systems will be very costly to rebuild, retool, and reinstate.

There is a huge benefit to the City in having the RCFD continue to serve the airport. Please consider these factors as you deliberate the proposed ordinance.

Sincerely,



Mike Roesler  
RCFD Battalion Chief (retired)