Stoneham Fire Department Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Budget

Why does the department rent vehicle storage space?

The one fire station in Stoneham was built in 1916, designed for horse-drawn fire apparatus and much smaller early motorized vehicles. The apparatus floor has 3 bays, with only 1 of the bays being long enough to store fire engines back to back. The back space has a height restriction that only allows for one of the 4 engines to fit. Due to the shortage of space, the two spare engines and support vehicles do not fit in the fire station. When left outside in a ready state, the water stored inside can freeze, causing catastrophic damage. Leaving vehicles outside with expensive equipment can lead to theft or vandalism and is not a viable option.

In fact, in February 2021, one of our trucks was vandalized by water being poured into the fuel tank. This resulted in a repair costing taxpayers $2,035.60. In addition to renting a secure heated bay from a private business, we occupy an unheated space from the Department of Public Works for an additional vehicle and a lighting tower. Also, we previously stored hazardous material supplies and gear at the DPW space, which was damaged by rodents, and ultimately discarded or relocated to the rented storage bay.

Leaving a fire truck outside in the elements can result in significant damage or even replacement. Once the truck is exposed to prolonged freezing temperatures, it can cause damage to the pump/piping/or tank that can cost upwards of $50,000 to repair. This is without even factoring in the elements such as rain, sleet, wind, etc., and the risks of rust, rot, and sun damage. Leaving the truck outside also puts the various equipment on the truck at risk. A replacement truck in 2025 costs upwards of $1.3 million.

The Stoneham Fire Department pays rent to store a reserve fire truck in a climate-controlled bay so that it is (1) ready for emergency use when needed, (2) not becoming damaged outdoors, requiring repairs that are much more costly than the current rent (3) secure from theft or vandalism.

Past Station Photos:
1925

1950s

Current station photos:

What is the importance of the ladder truck, and how is it used?

The ladder truck provides unique support at the scene of an emergency in many aspects, whether it is providing extraction tools or other equipment, or assisting in rescues, the ladder truck is essential to emergency response. Equipment includes airbags, the department's strongest hydraulic cutting tool/jaws of life, an assortment of ground ladders, vehicle stabilizers for crashes/rollovers, and more.

The Ladder Truck also provides a waterway, which is used to position a large water stream over roofs and into attics, extinguishing fires before spreading to neighboring homes. Fire spread is always a concern, especially in unexpected weather conditions such as high winds and drought. The first few minutes on the scene are crucial to prevent further damage, and the ladder truck allows firefighters to use tactics to help contain a fire at roof level.

The truck is needed when responding to fires and rescues for multi-story buildings, homes, and more, as it gives firefighters the ability to climb to high structures in an effort to safely extract residents and community members who are in need of immediate assistance. Also, the ladder truck provides emergency egress for firefighters operating inside fire buildings; the aerial or ground ladders are placed in a position that enables firefighters to escape should interior conditions and egress deteriorate. Finally, the ladders are used to ventilate both the roof and windows. This provides better conditions for victim survivability as well as interior firefighting operations. If the department did not have a ladder truck, it would have to rely on mutual aid, which would impact response time when seconds and minutes matter most.

The truck also takes a minimum of 3 people to operate it in a safe manner. Currently, there are two firefighters on each company who operate the ladder truck at a time. This is under the national standard as it is required to have 1 officer (Lt. or Capt.) and two firefighters operating the truck in order to best meet the needs of the community, and effectively rescue individuals. For example, if two firefighters are operating the ladder truck, one is operating the controls, and one is climbing the ladder to help rescue a resident who needs assistance evacuating a two-story home. If the resident is unable to walk or move, the firefighter on the ladder will not be able to safely extract them on their own. This is what occurred in Stoneham on November 14, 2024.

Why do we need more staff members?

Calls for service are continuously growing, and currently, the fire department is operating below the NFPA standard of 4 firefighters for each fire engine or truck. Adding additional staff members will bring Stoneham closer to the NFPA standard, as well as enabling a more coordinated and simultaneous response to emergencies.

For instance, it requires at least 3-4 firefighters to carry and position the 35 ft. ground ladder, which currently can not be done alone by a ladder crew of only 2 FF's. Being under-staffed also hinders the span of control — oftentimes being under-staffed forces Incident

Commanders to split up crews, exceeding the span of control – with firefighters working simultaneously on critical tasks. Span of control is more difficult to maintain, especially if mutual aid is added to the response. By adding staff to include promoting FF's to officers, crew integrity can be maintained, making for a better span of control and eliminating unsafe practices.

What are the National standards? Staffing and response?

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) is an organization that promotes the standard for firefighters across the country in an effort to maintain the best safety practices for departments and the communities they serve.

According to the NFPA the national staffing standard for firefighters should be four firefighters on duty per each engine (3 firefighters and 1 officer). Stoneham Fire currently operates 75% of the year with 2 firefighters per company, and no officers for two engines and the ladder truck, with the exception of Engine 1.

Response also depends on the size of the structure. For single-family homes or dwellings up to 2,000 square feet, a minimum of 16 firefighters is required to respond. Visit the NFPA website for additional information about response standards and structure.

For a fire response, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommends that 16 firefighters be on scene initially; however, if there are absences, Stoneham provides 8 firefighters responding (which occurs approximately 75% of the year).

In addition, OSHA mandates require a minimum of 4 firefighters be on scene (referred to as the 2-in/2- out rule) for interior firefighting to be conducted in an immediately dangerous to life and health (IDLH) environment. With increased call volume the potential for simultaneous calls increases the chances of less than 4 firefighters showing up to a fire with less than 4 firefighters.

With additional community and housing growth within the Town, what impact does it have on public safety?

While this will bring some income to the town, this is not commercial income. Having new residential buildings, including over 1,000 new apartment units, will increase the need for public safety personnel. In the past 20 years, the calls for service have increased 42%. More people lead to more traffic, which can result in crashes, medical calls, and calls for service.

Additionally, the majority of multi-family housing buildings in Stoneham do not have a working sprinkler system. Sprinklers are vital to fire response as they help limit and mitigate the spread of the fire immediately before the arrival of first responders. Click here to see the standard sprinkler requirements and the dangers of not having appropriate sprinkler systems.

Why can't the department lean more on mutual aid?

Mutual aid was not designed to subsidize the day-to-day normal operations of the fire department. All of Stoneham's abutting communities are staffed with more firefighters on duty every day.

The department currently operates under the 20-year Metro Fire Mutual Aid Agreement, either responding to other towns for calls or neighboring towns providing assistance in town. Currently, when Stoneham has to deploy mutual aid to another community, 3 firefighters (approx. ⅓ of the shift on duty) respond, leaving just 5 firefighters in Stoneham to respond to Stoneham-related calls. Stoneham calls back on-duty firefighters to man the station; however, it is now a common occurrence that no firefighters come back. However, if staffing were to be lowered, the town may be left with delayed responses while waiting for mutual aid to arrive.

If Stoneham were faced with cutting a company from service, the need for mutual aid would be even greater. This means that if two companies in Stoneham are responding to a scene which occurs daily, mutual aid will be needed to provide station coverage or respond to awaiting emergency calls.

What is an ISO rating, and what does that mean for the department?

ISO stands for Insurance Services Office, which is used to evaluate a community's fire protection capabilities. Departments are ranked 1-10 (one being the best and 10 being the worst) and are evaluated based on a formal review of operations, resources, and infrastructure.

Currently, Stoneham Fire has a score of 4. Having a good ISO rating helps support insurance premiums, meaning that the better the score, insurance companies may offer lower rates for the property insurance across the town.

Many things can impact an ISO rating, including equipment, staffing levels, water supply, community risk reduction, and emergency communication systems.

Having a low score, such as a 4, means the department is currently performing at a good standard. However, if there is a significant change in staffing levels, the score could become high, and the department would not be functioning at an operational level.