

# FREMONT FIRE DEPARTMENT RESPONDS TO FISCAL FIRE



*By Eugene Mueller*



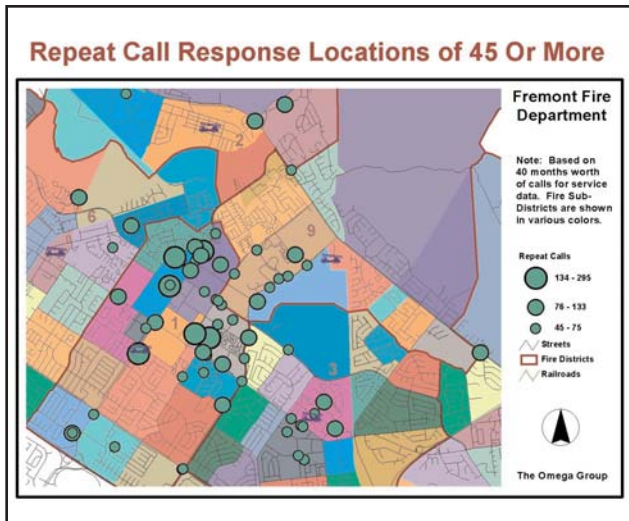
The public demands shorter response times. Firefighter unions stage public protests in resistance to reductions in paid fire service personnel deployment. City managers and city council officials want it all--rapid response within tight budgetary constraints. With all of these factors overlapping at once, today's fire chiefs are faced with complex decisions requiring sophisticated planning and analysis. Using information technology specifically developed for fire departments, the Fremont Fire Department (FFD) in Northern California is taking a systems approach to the strategic deployment of fire suppression and emergency medical response.

FFD never had a formal policy, Standards of Response Coverage (SORC), for geographic coverage for fire suppression and emergency response services. The absence of an SORC was understandable considering that the robust growth of Fremont over the years resulted in the annexation of adjoining jurisdictions and their existing fire departments. When Chief Willie McDonald took over the department in November 2002, he inherited a \$51 million voter approved bond measure for renovation and replacement of fire stations. While there was no time requirement as to when the rebuilding had to begin, Chief McDonald said, "I realized that the passage of the bond measure provided an opportunity for the department to create an SORC that would be based on viewing our deployment of resources as a system influenced by many factors. I did not assume that the current placement of stations was appropriate." The last thing any chief wants is a grand opening for a new firehouse that is structurally state of the art but functionally obsolete.

Chief McDonald authorized the formation of an SORC committee comprised of senior level staff. To assist the committee, Chief McDonald engaged the consulting services of CityGate Associates, LLC ("CityGate"), a firm that has expertise in SORC studies. Because there is no single measure that dictates deployment of resources, CityGate utilizes a comprehensive approach using measures such as travel and response times, directional workloads, risk assessment, call stacking, and daytime and nighttime scenarios to develop a composite picture of coverage requirements. This methodology contrasts with prescriptive models that call for a certain number of firefighters to respond within a certain time period regardless of risk factors within a jurisdiction. The result of this approach can be huge inefficiencies.

CityGate recommended that FFD acquire an incident mapping software application, FireView™, developed by The Omega Group, Inc. in San Diego, California. FireView uses a geographic information system for dispatch incident data analysis that allows an SORC to be developed. According to Ronny J. Coleman, Senior Associate who leads CityGates' Fire Protection and Emergency Services Division, "FireView is a managerial tool and not merely a justification tool. It allows fire executives to develop options on planning policy that are based on rational consequences of the data analysis rather than relying on the intuitiveness of what appears to be rational." Indeed, Chief McDonald points out that two of the city's eleven stations were located very near each other and it seemed that closure of the oldest would be likely. However, "FireView showed us that the workloads of these two stations were practically in opposite directions and that closure would not be in the best interest of public safety."

The imminent need for an SORC study was clear when a fire alarm of a different sort sounded from the office of the city manager of Fremont who informed the chief and other department heads that the city was facing its worst fiscal crisis in its history. The city of 208,000 residents is located within the Silicon Valley which is home to thousands of high tech companies. But the fall of the Nasdaq market over the last two years mirrored the



struggling local economy. The city was watching its sales tax revenue rapidly decline. The result was that Chief McDonald's operating budget would be effectively cut by nearly twenty percent over the current and succeeding fiscal years. Unable to utilize the \$51 million capitol budget fund for operating expenses, the reductions would have to be implemented immediately and he would have to present his recommendations for meeting the downsized budget to the city council within a matter of weeks.

Although he had to respond rapidly, Chief McDonald knew that his recommendations would still have to be based on comprehensive analyses. His budgetary solutions could not come at the expense of increased risk to the public. Chief McDonald emphasized, "Fortunately, the decision to do a systems analysis of our standards of coverage and linking our records management system to FireView was the key to successful planning."

The systems approach supported by FireView enabled Chief McDonald to avoid challenges to his recommendation. Having allowed the firefighters union to participate on the SORC committee, the union saw for itself that the process was transparent and completely data driven. As the Chief notes, "It was not a solution based on any sort of hidden agenda. FireView gave the union insight as to the consequences of various options." But even more telling was the reaction that Chief McDonald received when he met with the city manager to review the findings of his study before bringing it to the city council. As the Chief recounts, "The maps from FireView were so demonstrative that without hesitation she agreed with my recommendation saying 'it's the right thing to do' and that I should begin implementation without waiting for formal city council action, stating she would tell the members that this was the only way to proceed." A systems approach to deployment of resources backed by FireView analyses made Fremont Fire Department the planning expert.

For more information on FireView™, please contact The Omega Group, Inc.

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