

James O'Sullivan
Mike Eveloff
Fix The City

Sharon Gin
Legislative Assistant
Office of the City Clerk
200 N. Spring Street, 3rd Floor

Sent via email to: sharon.gin@lacity.org
phone: 213-978-1074

March 21, 2012

Re. "Hollywood Community Plan, Council File 12-0303"

Dear Ms. Gin,

Please include the following remarks for CF 12-0303, Hollywood Community Plan Update:

In light of the recent revelations concerning the misreporting of LAFD response time statistics, we respectfully request that you withdraw the Hollywood Community Plan, re-evaluate the Public Safety section and recirculate the EIR.

Articles highlighting the faulty data are attached.

Sincerely:
James O'Sullivan
Mike Eveloff
Fix The City

LAFD Deployment Plan Under Fire

Does LAFD's new deployment plan lead to longer response times?

By [Robert Kovacik](#) and [John Simerson](#)

| Sunday, Mar 4, 2012 | Updated 11:50 AM PDT

Monica Mocaer remembers losing her home and almost her father.

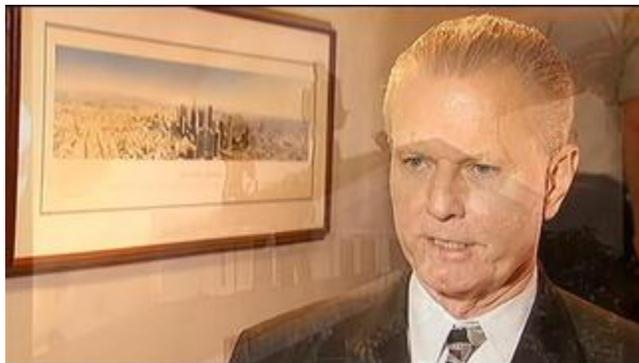
"My dad was screaming, 'I'm on fire. I'm on fire,'" she said. "And I hugged him and his skin came off in my arms."

Jack Mocaer, 53, has spent weeks in the Intensive Care Unit at the Grossman Burn Center after 60 percent of his body was burned in the fire, sparked in the early morning of Jan. 12.

The Mocaers called 911 and waited.

"I just stood there watching it get worse and worse," Monica said.

Photos and Videos



The closest fire station, 105, is barely two miles from the Mocaer's home. But that morning, the station was empty -- one of its two companies eliminated by budget cuts. The one remaining was already out on another emergency call.

"The company that should have been in that district would have gotten there in four minutes," said LAFD Captain John Rojas.

But the [incident report](#) showed Captain Rojas and the team from Station 106 arrived on scene in nine minutes.

"Could we have made a difference?" Rojas said. "We'll never know."

The goal of any fire department is to respond to an emergency in five minutes or less, 90 percent of the time, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

Why five minutes?

"In EMS, you are talking about clinical death after five minutes," said former LAFD Commissioner Tom Curry. "On structure fires, now you have roof collapse. And in brush fires, the first five minutes is more important than the next five hours."

The city of L.A.'s pressing financial needs have meant a new deployment plan for the LAFD. Four ambulances and 18 fire companies are now shut down for good, including the Mocaers' local engine company 105.

"The fire chief people came over and told us it took way too long and gave us his apology," Monica said.

Even before the new deployment plan took effect last July, the department was meeting the five minute goal only 63 percent of the time, according to documents obtained by NBC 4.

Since then, the goal is slipping farther away. Five-minute response time is now less than 60 percent.

Instead of the five minute goal, records show the LAFD responds on average in seven minutes and 24 seconds, 90 percent of the time.

"That means somewhere in the array, if you look closely enough, there are ten and twelve minute responses, which is unacceptable," Curry said.

Between July and November 2011, the longest response time happened on Sept. 20, when first responders arrived to South Hillcrest Drive in a little over 44 minutes, [according to documents](#).

L.A. firefighters may be called to an emergency and now have no choice but to leave their backyard unprotected.

"Ever since the deployment, I am not only fearing for the people who work for me," Rojas said. "I am fearing for the people of Los Angeles."

As for Jack Mocaear, he's facing months of rehabilitation while his family wonders just how much those few minutes would have mattered.

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Posted Wednesday, Feb 29, 2012 - 9:12 PM PDT



LA Fire Dept. Fudges Response Time Stats

Former department statistician inflates numbers so it shows firefighters getting to emergencies quicker

LA fire department officials admitted that for years the agency has used data that made it appear that firefighters were arriving at the scene of emergencies faster than they actually were, according to the [Los Angeles Times](#).

Federal guidelines call for first responders to arrive in less than five minutes 90 percent of the time.

But The Times reported a former department statistician counted all responses within six minutes, and that inflated the percentage of firefighters arriving within five minutes of a dispatch.

Retired Capt. Billy Wells said he followed the department's tradition of using a six-minute response standard, and his successor, Capt. Mark Woolf, said he continued using the for a while, because he didn't want to be blamed for a sudden drop in department performance.

“I didn't want to touch that (extra) minute because I knew the data would take a dump,” Woolf told The Times.

Corrected data shows that in 2008, the department actually hit the five- minute goal 64 percent of the time, officials said.

By last year, that number had fallen to about 60 percent.

Fire Department spending has been reduced more than 15 percent in recent years, and about a quarter of the city's 106 fire stations have eliminated staffing for fire trucks or ambulances, according to The Times.

The issue came about recently because Los Angeles mayoral candidate Austin Beutner blamed slower response times on staffing cuts due to city budget woes.

Beutner was first deputy mayor under Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa prior to the fire department staffing plan being put into effect, according to a Beutner staff member.

NBC4's Robert Kovacic [recently talked to Fire Chief Brian Cummings](#) about response times.

The news also comes as [NBC4 reports](#) that firefighters are not getting all of the emergency notifications meant for them.

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L.A. mayor orders fire chief to stop withholding information

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa acts a day after L.A. City Council members criticized the department for halting its practice of disclosing basic emergency response details.

By Kate Linthicum and Robert J. Lopez, Los Angeles Times

March 22, 2012

Amid a squall of criticism, Los Angeles Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#) late Wednesday ordered his Fire Department chief to stop withholding basic information about responses to medical emergencies.

The mayor's unusually blunt order came after a day in which council members criticized the department for halting its years-long practice of providing the public with basic rescue response details, including times, locations and the nature of emergencies, as well as the age and gender of victims.

The sudden change in disclosure was announced earlier this week, even as the department struggled to reassure the public and city lawmakers about response time reports that made it appear that rescuers were getting to people in crisis faster than they actually were. A malfunctioning dispatching system that has delayed help for some victims in recent weeks has added to the department's woes.

The mayor's directive marks the first time since the controversy began that Villaraigosa has publicly broken ranks with Fire Chief Brian Cummings and his policies.

"At a time when the [Los Angeles Fire Department](#) needs more transparency — not less — I am directing you to immediately resume releasing information that provides LAFD incident specifics without violating federal law," Villaraigosa wrote in a letter to Cummings.

He acknowledged the chief's expressed concern about possibly violating patients' privacy rights, which are protected by federal law. But he said, "In the absence of a written legal opinion giving the department guidance, I believe it is our duty to provide information to the media and the public."

The City Council's Public Safety Committee has set a special hearing Friday to probe recent problems at the department and the disclosure policy.

The department has long released basic information about its responses to medical emergencies, even highlighting some incidents on its popular Twitter feed. Last week, the department tweeted to more than 18,000 followers the details of a traffic accident at 11653 W. Moorpark St. in which 11-year-old twin girls were struck by a vehicle. One was critically injured and the other was seriously injured.

But in an appearance before the Fire Commission this week, Cummings said the department has stopped releasing that type of information. He cited the 1996 federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, known as HIPAA, which guards patient privacy by limiting the medical details that healthcare providers can release.

The Fire Department's new approach was signaled Friday in a letter to Times reporters who had requested basic details on emergency responses affected by a brief March 7 breakdown of the agency's dispatch system.

In it, Cummings said the agency requested and was awaiting a legal opinion on medical privacy issues from the city attorney's office. That office preliminarily advised the department to "immediately cease" its practice of releasing emergency medical information, Cummings wrote.

William Carter, chief deputy to City Atty. Carmen Trutanich, said his office's advice to the Fire Department "has been consistent" in recent years. But he said attorney-client privilege prevented him from discussing that legal advice. The federal law cited by the chief "is not a blanket prohibition against the release of all public information," he said.

Other fire agencies in the state do disclose basic information about medical calls to the public, said Jim Ewen, general counsel for the California Newspaper Publishers Assn.

It was unclear late Wednesday when and how the department would comply with the mayor's order.

"We are not going to violate federal law," said Battalion Chief Armando Hogan, adding that the agency will look into the type of information it can release.

Outcry over the department's new disclosure restrictions spread quickly inside and outside City Hall after Cummings' announcement. Councilman Mitchell Englander, who chairs the city's Public Safety Committee, said the timing "couldn't be worse."

"While they're being questioned by the city and by the media about their fuzzy math ... to come up with something like this makes no sense," he said.

"I understand patient privacy and perhaps not releasing names," said Englander, who sits on a board that governs five hospitals. "But to withhold the information in terms of location and other details does not make any sense."

Cary Brazeman, a candidate for city controller, said the department's focus should be on improving emergency service, "not playing hide and seek with public information."

An attorney for the Radio and Television News Assn. sent a sharply worded letter to Cummings, saying "the public's health and safety often depends on knowledge about emergency conditions."

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Politics lights a fire under L.A. Fire Department

A mayoral hopeful unwittingly exposes overstated emergency response times.

By Kate Linthicum, Los Angeles Times

March 9, 2012, 10:39 p.m.

A Los Angeles mayoral candidate took an early campaign swipe at his leading opponents this week and inadvertently exposed the city Fire Department for publishing misleading performance data.

Top brass at the [Los Angeles Fire Department](#) on Friday admitted that for years the agency put out data that made it appear that firefighters were arriving at the scene of emergencies faster than they actually were.

The dust-up began Thursday, when candidate Austin Beutner complained in an online [Huffington Post](#) column that recent Fire Department budget cuts have sent response times for medical emergencies soaring. Beutner laid the blame on the City Council members who approved the cuts, singling out mayoral rivals [Eric Garcetti](#) and [Jan Perry](#). He also criticized another opponent, City Controller [Wendy Greuel](#), for failing to scrutinize the impact of the cuts.

Relying on Fire Department reports presented to lawmakers, Beutner said that in 2008 the department responded to medical emergencies within five minutes 86% of the time. After the cuts, the department last year met that standard just 59% of the time, he said.

Following Beutner's critique — and a Times inquiry — the department made an awkward admission: Data showing it did so well in the past was simply wrong.

Federal guidelines call for first responders to arrive on scene in under five minutes 90% of the time. But a former department statistician counted all responses within six minutes, officials explained, which improved the record. Retired Captain Billy Wells, who crunched the data with a hand calculator, said he followed the department's long tradition of using a six-minute response standard.

Wells' successor, Capt. Mark Woolf, said he reluctantly continued using the flawed formula for a time because he didn't want to be blamed for a sudden drop in department performance. "I didn't want to touch that [extra] minute because I knew the data would take a dump," he said.

Corrected data generated by a new computer system shows that in 2008, the department actually hit the five-minute goal only 64% of the time, officials said. By last year, that number had fallen to about 60%.

The statistics snafu comes as the department is facing increased scrutiny over how budget reductions have affected service.

Fire Chief Brian Cummings said his department's performance is pretty good, given the 16% reduction to its budget in recent years, which has led to the elimination of fire trucks or ambulances at about one-fourth of the city's 106 fire stations. The average response time citywide has increased only several seconds, he said. "I need the public to be reassured that we're going to get there and get there in a timely matter," Cummings said.

Others disagree. The head of the firefighters union has complained that his members are being run ragged. And

he says there has been a rise in "collisions," when units struggle to respond to simultaneous emergencies in the same station area. That's what happened in January, when a man trapped inside a burning house in the San Fernando Valley suffered severe burns after it took firefighters nine minutes to arrive on scene, said Pat McOsker, the president of United Firefighters of Los Angeles. A fire truck from the nearest station was out on another call, he said, and the back-up truck there had been eliminated because of the cutbacks.

McOsker says a promise from the fire chief to shift some trucks and ambulances around the city next month isn't enough. "The way to solve this problem is to reopen resources, not to reshuffle the deck," he said. "We're not giving people the best chance to survive these things."

He also pointed to problems with aging dispatch equipment that has been malfunctioning. Officials say they've been forced to rely on a backup system. The department recently opened a new bond-financed dispatch center, but hasn't had the money to upgrade its equipment.

While Beutner criticized the service reductions in his recent column, he failed to mention Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#), who prepares the city budget and who called for Fire Department cuts. Beutner was Villaraigosa's "jobs czar" in 2010, the year before the mayor said the department must make cuts that analysts said would save the city nearly \$200 million.

"This was the mayor's office's plan and Beutner was first deputy mayor when it was created," said Yusef Robb, a spokesman for Garcetti, the main target of Beutner's attack. He said Garcetti helped save 318 staff positions in the Fire Department that the mayor sought to permanently eliminate.

Councilman Mitchell Englander, who joined the council after the cuts, said the department has been "decimated" in recent years and needs more money. He said he is working with the department to focus on collecting more accurate and useful data.

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Los Angeles Times Staff Writer Ben Welsh contributed to this report.

Injured and ailing people wait as dispatch problems slow LAFD

Firefighters and paramedics cite confusion at stations, delays and other problems. The commission will address response times and equipment troubles Tuesday.

By Kate Linthicum and Robert J. Lopez, Los Angeles Times

March 17, 2012, 9:08 p.m.

When the machine swallowed her hand, slicing off one finger and mangling the rest, Tania Wafer's co-workers tried frantically to stop the bleeding as a supervisor dialed 911.

Hang on, they told her as she slid in and out of consciousness on the floor of the printing plant. The ambulance will come soon.

It didn't. Wafer waited nearly 45 minutes for [Los Angeles Fire Department](#) paramedics to arrive because of ongoing problems with the agency's emergency dispatch system.

The dismemberment occurred March 7, when a brief equipment failure left dispatchers unable to alert fire stations. At a firehouse in Harbor Gateway near Torrance, just a mile from the bleeding woman, the alarms never rang, according to firefighters.

"I was in horrible, horrible pain," said Wafer, 36, who was later told by a doctor that too much time had elapsed to reattach her finger.

Wafer's case is one of several recent Fire Department dispatching problems compiled by The Times. The city Fire Commission has allocated emergency funds for technical experts who are trying to fix the glitches in a system crucial to tens of thousands of emergency responses each month.

Fire Chief Brian Cummings and Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#) say that the city is safe and that rescuers will come when called. At a news conference last week, Cummings said the system is working properly "99% of the time." And during the March 7 system breakdown, just two calls out of 1,000 were missed and no one died in either of those cases, he said.

But firefighters in the field say recurring problems have delayed responses to other emergencies in recent days, including a March 2 fire in South Los Angeles in which two people died.

The system problems have created confusion at station houses and have forced dispatchers to rely on antiquated backup plans, firefighters say. Bob Ashley, a dispatcher who has been with the department for 25 years, said that after several computer crashes in recent weeks, he and his colleagues tracked the availability of fire engines and ambulances with a peg board and golf tees.

The instability of the dispatch system, which officials blame on aging equipment and a move to a new building late last month, has prompted Villaraigosa to order a full review of the operation.

The technical failures are adding to questions about the department's performance and transparency after The

Times disclosed that for years, fire officials published statistics showing rescuers were responding to medical emergencies faster than they actually were.

Those numbers were included in reports that lawmakers considered when making deep cuts in emergency services last year. Several City Council members are now calling for audits of department data and probes of the public safety cutbacks.

Fire Commission President Genethia Hudley-Hayes complained that she learned that dispatch problems had affected emergency responses only last week, after reading about the news conference Cummings held.

The chief's failure to tell the commission about the gravity of the problems was "a horrible breach of what should have happened," she said. The commission will address response time statistics and equipment troubles at a meeting on Tuesday.

When the dispatch system works properly, fire stations are alerted by flashing lights, followed by an alarm that sounds over loudspeakers and a digitized voice that announces which personnel and units are needed, as well as the location and nature of the emergency. Station phones and bells also ring.

But at times, some or all of the notifications have failed, causing firefighters to waste precious seconds figuring out the location and type of emergency and who needs to respond, according to records and interviews. As a backup, fire stations have been ordered periodically to go on "radio watch." That requires firefighters to monitor radio calls involving numerous stations for any incidents requiring their station to respond.

The night before the March 2 fire in South Los Angeles, firefighters at the nearest station to the scene said they went to sleep after receiving a department notice that radio watch had been canceled. According to the notice, [a copy of which was obtained by The Times](#), firefighters were advised that the system's voice notification "was intermittent and cannot be relied upon." But in the event of an emergency, crews were assured, station lights would blink, bells would sound and dispatch phones would ring.

Shortly before 6 a.m., the lights flashed at Station 14, but the alarms were silent. Firefighters woke in confusion, not sure whether they had an emergency. "Everybody was kind of staring at each other," said Freddy Purcell, a 23-year department veteran who was on duty.

Purcell slid down a fire pole as a Teletype machine printed the address of the fire on East Vernon Avenue, less than a mile away.

One firefighter tried to use the station's loudspeaker to alert the rest of the crew. It wasn't working either, so he ran upstairs and roused crew members.

Purcell and his partner rushed to the fire in their ambulance, arriving before other units. But they had no equipment to fight the flames that were tearing through the building.

The first firetruck — from another station — arrived more than seven minutes after the initial alarm, seconds before the engine from Station 14, according to dispatch records and interviews. The department's goal is to be on fire scenes within five minutes 90% of the time. Even the slightest delays can mean the difference between life and death, officials say.

As firefighters shot water on the blaze, a woman appeared in a window. She was jerking desperately at a row of iron security bars, trying to break free.

"She was still alive when we pulled her out," Purcell recalled.

The woman was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital. The next day, fire crews found a second body — a man's — in the ashes. Firefighters suspect arson, and the coroner's office said the woman's death is being investigated as a homicide.

Those who battled the blaze, in a vacant building where transients sometimes stayed, said they will never know whether they could have saved the victims. But without the confusion caused by the malfunctioning alarm system, the fire engine from Station 14 could have been on the scene a couple of minutes sooner, according to firefighters at the station.

"We were delayed because of the dispatch," said Greg Ikeda, a Station 14 firefighter. "It was not normal. That's all I have to say."

A week later, the alarms failed to sound at Fire Station 87 in the San Fernando Valley, according to a captain on duty, who said his crew lost about a minute getting to a fire that engulfed two condominiums.

Although no one was injured in that incident, "a minute is a long time if you're a victim in a fire," said Capt. Jeff Dapper, who was awakened by flashing lights and hustled to the Teletype machine to find out about the emergency.

On March 7, the day of the major system breakdown, an elderly man in San Pedro dialed 911 and said he was having trouble breathing, according to a Fire Department source who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation. At nearby Fire Station 101, firefighters were alerted to the emergency, but the computer on their truck transmitted only a partial address, sending them to a trailer park near the waterfront, the source said. The ambulance raced through the park with its sirens blaring, looking for the victim's home, but returned to the station when they couldn't find him.

It took nearly an hour — and another 911 call from the victim — before he was finally found and taken to a hospital, the source said. The department declined to provide information on the incident, or others included in this report, but the San Pedro patient survived, according to the department source.

On that same morning, Wafer's hand got snagged in a binding machine at the printing plant.

As her co-workers gathered around, they wondered what was taking rescuers so long. Even her husband, who was asleep at the couple's Wilmington home when he got the call, managed to get to the plant before paramedics.

Fire Department medics learned of Wafer's crisis only after a plant worker eventually tracked down a phone number for the local firehouse and called directly. In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, the paramedics apologized to Wafer for not coming sooner.

"I waited so, so long," said Wafer, a mother of four. "I could have stayed there dying, waiting for them."

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L.A. Fire Department's smoke and mirrors on response time

The Fire Commission needs to ask officials tough questions on how performance results were calculated and how to improve them in tough financial times.

By Steve Lopez

March 21, 2012

Maybe I was beginning to suffer from smoke inhalation. All I know is that I started feeling faint at Tuesday's meeting of the Los Angeles Fire Commission right around the time LAFD Fire Chief Brian Cummings attempted, yet again, to explain mysterious discrepancies regarding emergency response times.

You'd have been dizzy too, hearing about metrics, deployment models, projections and changing formulas.

I knew 20 minutes into the meeting that if I fainted and fell over backward, and someone called 911, no one in the room could say for sure how long the projected or actual response might take or what formula would be used to compute it.

FOR THE RECORD:

Genethia Hudley-Hayes: Steve Lopez's column in the March 21 Section A gave an incorrect name for the president of the L.A. city fire commission. She is Genethia Hudley-Hayes, not Genethia Hudson-Hayes.

I did learn at the meeting that when you call 911 for a fire or medical emergency, the call goes to the [LAPD](#) first. Typically, said an assistant chief, it might take 30 seconds for the call to get bounced over to the Fire Department (the LAPD tells me this can take a full 60 seconds). And it can take an additional 90 seconds for the fire dispatchers to determine exactly what's going on and send the call to the right fire station.

FOR THE RECORD:

LAFD response times: In the March 21 Section A, a column about Los Angeles Fire Department response times misspelled the last name of the president of the city Fire Commission. She is Genethia Hudley-Hayes, not Hudson-Hayes. —

After that, it can take 60 more seconds for a unit to roll.

So we're already up to as much as 31/2 minutes from the time of the call until the time they start their engines, and even longer if the call is made on a cellphone. And the whole point of discussing response times is that if you're not breathing, you could be brain-dead in four to six minutes.

As The Times has reported, LAFD officials have admitted they used a six-minute response standard in calculating how well they performed, even as city officials were led to believe a five-minute standard was being used.

It's still not clear to me why that happened. But it is clear that budget cuts were made on the basis of the brighter outlook, and City Council members are demanding an investigation and an explanation.

And then Tuesday, Cummings served up an explanation I hadn't heard yet. He said the department was using projected data instead of real data.

Are you still with me?

If so, then we're both lost.

Cummings said a computer model had projected that the department responded to medical emergencies within five minutes 79% of the time in 2008, and that after budget cuts, the figure would drop to 77%.

But those, he said, were just projections.

In fact, the department responded within five minutes only 64% of the time a few years ago, and now the number is around 60%, which, if it's true, falls about 30% short of the standard many departments shoot for.

"The story changes every time he opens his mouth," said Pat McOsker, president of the firefighters union.

Genethia Hudson-Hayes, president of the Fire Commission, didn't seem too upset about having been misled by Cummings and his crazy algebra, but then, it wasn't even clear that she felt misled. She said the slower responses are obviously related to manpower and resource cuts.

"The bottom line is, we're thin. And we need more money," she said.

Really?

I thought one of the other commissioners might step up to the plate, but instead Commissioner Andrew Friedman made a rambling speech that touched on his 15 grandchildren, cookies, his native Hungary, and his steadfast belief that Los Angeles is the next best thing to heaven.

What we need is commissioners who don't give the chief a pass, acting more like lap dogs than watchdogs. It seemed all the commission wanted to do was state for the record that it didn't intentionally mislead the City Council. It didn't seem to have any inclination to call Cummings on the carpet, which is what I would have done. Not just for the way he tells time, but for the deployment plan he's put in place.

Not that this is an easy job. Los Angeles poses many challenges for a Fire Department, given the hundreds of square miles, the winds, the density, the high-rises, the brush, the traffic, the medically uninsured who wait until it's bad and then dial 911.

You can't do it on the cheap, and in fact, mayoral candidate Austin Beutner is passing around a Fire Department report from last November that suggests response times were horrible in some neighborhoods last year after new budget cuts were implemented.

Pat Pope of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council isn't surprised. He said he didn't like what he heard last spring when Cummings visited the neighborhood to explain how the department would try to keep them covered despite cutting back on equipment and staffing.

"I don't think he said this was good, he just said this was better than rolling brownouts," said Pope, referring to the previous budget-cutting model.

But Pope, a retired telephone company employee, said he believes public safety is at greater risk in Porter Ranch in the last few months with the loss of a hook and ladder truck, an ambulance and an engine company.

"There are no paramedics north of the 118 now between the 405 and the city limits to the west," he said.

Of course more money would help, but while the Fire Commission waits for millions to fall from the sky, we need to look at more than response times.

Is better technology available for both dispatch and fleet deployment?

Can we get residents to stop bothering the Fire Department with stubbed toes, burnt toast and backyard snakes?

And more than 80% of all calls are for medical problems, yet the department is still built to fight fires. That means that lumbering, gas-guzzling big rigs with large crews often go racing through the city as the first responders. Are there ways to retool?

First and foremost, though, where's Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#), and can he please explain what his fire chief is talking about?

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Weary L.A. firefighters speak up

Longer runs to emergencies, a dysfunctional dispatch system and aging equipment are among dangerous problems.

By Steve Lopez

March 17, 2012, 6:54 p.m.

Last week, L.A. Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#) and the city's fire chief said there's no cause for worry about slower response times after severe cutbacks at LAFD.

Partly, it's because there still hasn't been a good explanation for the mumbo jumbo we've been fed about the different formulas used to determine response times. My colleagues Kate [Linthicum](#), Robert Lopez and Dave Zahniser have reported that the Fire Department gave misleading information to city officials, reporting that response time was within five minutes 80% of the time when the real number was closer to 60%.

Nobody was lying, we're told. But the Fire Department has now switched to a more accurate formula for tracking response times.

How hard can this be?

Your house is on fire, you call the Fire Department, and they show up in either four minutes, five, six, 10, whatever.

Does it have to be more complicated than that?

It was on the basis of the rosier information that the mayor and council agreed to big cuts. Now Fire Chief Brian Cummings admits the department should have made clear that it had switched to a different formula, and both he and Villaraigosa tell us both formulas were accurate.

Huh?

They also said public safety hasn't been compromised by the mothballing of equipment as part of a plan to save \$200 million over three years.

How could it not be compromised?

I've been talking to firefighters, and they tell me they're being run ragged to cover station closures; they say the dispatch system is on the fritz; and they say routine equipment repairs can now take months because of a shrunken maintenance crew.

"This department is being held together with bubble gum, baling wire and duct tape," says Pat McOsker, president of United Firefighters of Los Angeles City.

"Forty percent of the time we are not getting there in time to prevent brain death," said McOsker, referring to the length of time it generally takes for someone who's not breathing to suffer lasting injury.

You'd expect that argument from a union boss, but McOsker's not the only critic here.

Austin Beutner, a former Villaraigosa deputy who's now running for mayor, has stirred things up by digging into response times and other dirty little secrets. He said some parts of the city aren't getting close to a five-minute response 60% of the time, and even if they were, why would that be acceptable?

"We should be talking about why we're not at 90%," said Beutner, who pointed out that San Francisco is pretty close to that number.

"I heard the City Council stand up and brag when they made this last round of cuts about how this was going to make us safer," said Beutner, who ripped his former City Hall mates — some of whom he's now running against in the mayor's race — for not being more inclined toward critical analysis. "The buck stops ... with those who were elected to oversee all of this, and what have this council and mayor been doing the last three or four years?"

Mid-City resident Mike Eveloff has been doing his own spade work, demanding Fire Department records and crunching numbers. When you remove equipment from service and shutter or partially shutter fire stations, you're playing a game of Russian roulette, said Eveloff.

"You see them on longer and longer runs because they don't have as many firefighters. As an example, my station, 92, they were sent 14 miles away to the eastern part of Hollywood with red lights and siren. It's happening all the time," said Eveloff.

"If you look into the eyes of these guys, they are beat to death."

And so, they tell me, is the equipment.

Tony Mastrolia, senior heavy duty mechanic, said a hiring freeze, early retirement and defections to the Department of Water and Power — which inexplicably pays mechanics far more, thanks to the agency's union clout with elected officials — have slashed his staff by about 30%. Also, a heavy equipment repair unit in the Valley was shut down, so those trucks now have to schlep all the way downtown.

So it takes longer for trucks to get serviced, said Mastrolia. And when they're down, it means the much older reserve fleet is rolled out, "and now those are breaking down."

E. Max Hengst, a 28-year veteran and now a captain at Station 76 in the Cahuenga Pass area, said the troops are still professionals with a lot of pride, but "morale in this department is as low as it's ever been." His crew has answered calls as far away as Woodland Hills, he said, and the busy pace and long runs take their toll. Hengst wrote a book, "LAFD FF/PM, Memoirs of an Outside Dog," in which he makes a sad observation:

"When I first came on, retirement was a sad day for the retiree. Now it seems like the retiree can't leave soon enough."

I decided to call a recently retired captain I met under difficult circumstances. It was way back on March 5, 2004, when a cyclist took a nasty fall near the L.A. Zoo.

"You were conscious," said Ed Banda, the now-retired captain from Station 76, whose crew rushed to my aid in about five minutes as he recalls. "But you were making repetitive statements indicating some sort of head trauma."

They put me on a board, collared my neck, immobilized my head, and I was whipped over to County-USC Medical Center, where I suffered two seizures in ER but lived to write about it.

Banda said 76 often rolled far from home in later years, thanks to the cutbacks, so 2004 was a good year to fall off a bike.

As for me, I've had a full recovery, except for a throbbing pain in my head every time the mayor says don't worry.

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L.A. fire chief offers new explanation of flawed response times

Official says the department used computerized projections rather than actual data, showing that the department met its five-minute goal 79% of the time instead of the 64% achieved in 2008.

By Robert J. Lopez and Kate Linthicum, Los Angeles Times

March 21, 2012

Los Angeles Fire Chief Brian Cummings drew more criticism Tuesday after he offered yet another explanation of how his agency has calculated and reported emergency response times to city officials.

Speaking to the Fire Commission, Cummings said his department used computerized projections of response times — instead of actual performance data — in reports about pending budget cuts that were presented to the commission and City Council members last year.

Using hypothetical models that assumed full staffing, the reports calculated that the Fire Department would have arrived on the scene of medical emergencies within five minutes nearly 80% of the time in 2008. The same analysis showed that after the proposed cuts the figure would decline only slightly.

In reality, officials say, the department met the five-minute goal only 64% of the time in 2008, and now meets it only 60% of the time.

Fire Commission President Genethia Hudley-Hayes and City Council members said Tuesday that they were not told that forecasts of expected response times were used in department reports.

Hudley-Hayes told reporters she did not believe the department had intentionally misled officials. But she said, "We should have been apprised of the fact that they used projections at one point as opposed to using actual data about what was happening on a day-to-day basis."

The department has been buffeted by questions about its response times in recent weeks, as well as concerns about technical problems in its emergency dispatching system.

For years, officials acknowledge, the agency used a six-minute time frame to calculate medical emergency response times. But the results were expressed in public reports as being less than five minutes, making the department's performance appear to be better than it was. A new formula that conforms to widely accepted national standards and counts only calls responded to in less than five minutes is now being used, officials said.

During the commission meeting, Cummings acknowledged that he had "not been clear in communicating the department's use of data." He defended the use of projections, saying they made it possible to "compare like simulations to like simulations." Cummings helped draft the plan to cut the budget before being named chief last summer.

The projections were included in reports given to City Council members last spring as lawmakers considered a plan to cut fire engines and ambulances from more than one-fifth of the agency's 106 firehouses.

Councilman [Dennis Zine](#) said he would not have voted for the cuts if he knew the department was getting to emergencies in less than five minutes only 64% of the time, a figure lower than the 90% goal set by the National Fire Protection Assn.

"In my 40-plus years with the city I've never heard of response times being projections," said Zine, a former [Los Angeles Police Department](#) officer. "I'm appalled that they're switching these numbers and coming up with different excuses."

A spokesman for Councilman [Eric Garcetti](#), who is running for mayor, questioned why the department used projections for 2008, rather than actual performance data.

"This is like 'The Twilight Zone,' " Yusef Robb said. "How do you project the past?"

The controversy over response times, which involves a fundamental public safety issue affecting every corner of the city and hundreds of thousands of residents each year, has resonated with candidates jockeying to succeed Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

Garcetti and [Jan Perry](#), another mayoral hopeful, called for outside reviews of the Fire Department's methodology Tuesday. Another mayoral candidate, Controller [Wendy Greuel](#), has launched her own audit. And former investment banker and onetime Villaraigosa deputy Austin Beutner continued to blame his mayoral rivals at City Hall for reducing the Fire Department budget.

The Fire Commission also was briefed on the department's dispatch system, which broke down March 7 and has caused delays in some responses to emergencies. The Times reported that the problems caused a woman with a severed finger to wait nearly 45 minutes for paramedics and also delayed firefighters during a South Los Angeles structure fire in which two people died.

Battalion Chief Brian Schultz placed part of the blame on a piece of aging equipment that he said "was known to have problems," and which department officials asked to be replaced five years ago. Now, \$5.4 million in grant money needed to make the fix has been identified, he said, and bids will be solicited in several weeks.

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