



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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OPENING STATEMENT
Sept. 25, 2009 Hearing on Chain Bridge Road Fire

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On July 29, 2009 the home of Peggy Cooper Cafritz was destroyed by fire. The subsequent *Washington Post* article (headlined "Water Pressure During NW Fire Hampered Aid") began: "District firefighters battling the blaze that gutted an upper Northwest mansion Wednesday night had grave difficulties finding enough water to douse the flames, despite promises from city officials two years ago that the water problems that had plagued them at previous fires would be fixed."

Fire protection is one of the most critical services a government provides its citizens. To learn that the fire department has problems obtaining water to fight fires is greatly upsetting, to say the least.

But water supply is a new issue. It was not raised in connection with District fires until the Georgetown Library fire in 2007. This begs the question: did something happen in recent years to reduce the supply of water? I think not. Indeed, the only systemic changes regarding water supply have been positive: fewer fire hydrants are inoperable, and more information about fire hydrants is available, and available electronically to fire fighters in the field.

The Fire and EMS Department (which I will call FEMS) was quick to point out after the Cafritz fire that they did not have enough water for almost an hour. But last week, when Councilmember Jim Graham asked at a public hearing whether there had been enough water to fight the fire, Chief Rubin said: "Sir, I know you're looking for a 'yes' or 'no,' but I don't have one...That's, of course, the \$64,000 question."

Well, the answer is yes. Yes, there was enough water to fight the fire. Not only is something wrong that the fire department did not know this on July 29th, but it there is something wrong when the command staff still doesn't know the answer. Department leaders should take the issue more seriously.

FEMS has testified that it needed an estimated 1,600 (1,643) gallons per minute water flow to fight the Cafritz fire. In fact, there was over 3,800 (3838) gpm available from four hydrants on or just off of nearby Loughboro Road. But two of these hydrants were never tapped (totaling almost 2,200 gpm), and a third had been tapped but was then abandoned (1,057 gpm). The fire command staff simply did not understand this water availability.

Instead, within the first 15-20 minutes of arrival, FEMS accessed four hydrants on the same 8" water main serving Chain Bridge Road. This made some sense for the very first responders. But veteran firefighters know that one cannot tap multiple fire hydrants on the same water main without losing pressure.. One of the hydrants closest to the fire had been banded to indicate a water flow of

less than 500 gallons per minute, so the effect of opening four hydrants on the same main was to reduce the flow of each to a dangerously inadequate level. However, rather than abandon three of the four hydrants, FEMS abandoned all four.

Then the fire command decided to look for large water mains, which took them 8 or 9 tenths of a mile downhill to MacArthur Boulevard where they tapped two hydrants. The change in elevation was so substantial as to complicate delivery of the water to the fire ground.

Common sense would suggest that the better place to access hydrants on different, possibly larger water mains would be 900 - 1800 feet away on Loughboro Road (an arterial street) or adjacent side streets – all at roughly the same elevation – rather than about 4,000 feet away on MacArthur Boulevard, a significantly lower elevation.

At best, it seems FEMS personnel were confused, sucking dry the closest hydrants, bypassing good hydrants not too far away, and expending precious resources accessing hydrants almost a mile distant. Shouldn't there have been one person designated to look at the water system map and better assign the 26 engines and 4 water supply pumpers on the scene?

But at last week's hearing we learned from Chief Rubin, unapologetically, that FEMS command staff did not bother to consult a water system map during the Cafritz fire. Indeed, Assistant Chief Schultz, who was the incident commander, testified that the map they had was "several years old ... so the information is hardly useful." I'd like to know what about the 8" main under Chain Bridge Road has changed in the last 75 years to make the system map "hardly useful"?

The July 29th fire brought to our attention the vulnerability of Chain Bridge Road to fire protection. The Cafritz house was near a cross street. But halfway to the south, the homeowners have only one, encrusted 8 inch main to protect them. Notwithstanding monthly meetings on this subject with WASA, it took FEMS two months to finally get around to adding Chain Bridge Road to its "Areas of Awareness" list – a list of areas of concern.

There are certain facts about the Chain Bridge Road fire that are eerily similar to an October 1, 2007 fire on Adams Mill Road, NW. After that incident, FEMS criticized the lack of water. The first responders had hooked up to multiple hydrants on the same water main, which became useless as a result. Then FEMS stretched hoses some 2,500 feet across the Calvert Street Bridge to Connecticut Avenue. After the fire it was realized that over 4,000 gpm was available from several hydrants less than 700 feet in the opposite direction.

Why is history repeating itself? One reason is that evidently the FEMS command staff does not consider water system maps to be useful. A November 2007 report on the Adams Mill Road fire stressed the importance of system maps for fire fighting. On December 3, 2007 WASA delivered to FEMS a hard copy set of maps, along with a CD of the maps. One year later (11/14/08) WASA testified before this committee, in the presence of Fire Chief Rubin, that "We [WASA] reviewed the current system maps and map books with Fire and EMS to ensure they have the most up-to-date documents." But last week, for the first time, Chief Rubin stated he didn't have the hard copy set

of maps and he couldn't use the CD. It was apparent that FEMS had done nothing to obtain the maps for 20 months.

Along with maps there must be training. WASA reports that it has repeatedly offered to train Battalion Chiefs and others to read the maps and understand the water system. That training has yet to occur in the two years since the Adams Mill Road fire, although finally it has been scheduled.

When the second alarm was sounded for Chain Bridge Road at 8:30 p.m., WASA was notified. WASA investigators arrived at 9:00 p.m. But instead of being asked to find higher flowing hydrants, they were asked only to check hydrants and valves in the area to ensure that all hydrants were working. It was not until the WASA Water Services Manager arrived at 9:15 that there was a request to find larger water mains. This was one hour after the first call reporting the fire to 911. A survey of surrounding jurisdictions reveals that FEMS is the only fire department that routinely seeks assistance from the water authority when there is a fire.

A fire fighter wrote after the fire to suggest that problems with the fire were more about fire ground management than water:

We were making headway until we were pulled out. The fire ground leadership (Incident Command) during this fire through their poor decisions and poor fire ground tactics created the mess that became that fire. Was the water supply an issue, Yes, however, with good leadership, sound tactics, and a coordinated fire attack that fire could have been extinguished before it became a total loss. The infighting that went on at the Chief's level on the fire ground was disgusting to see from a line firefighter's perspective.

We need to be clear in this discussion that any issues regarding the July 29th fire lie not with WASA and the water supply system. Instead, I believe, FEMS is using the infrastructure issue as a smokescreen for the real problem – poor leadership. As I mentioned in the beginning of my statement, water supply is not a new issue. Common sense and, I assume, basic firefighting tactics, tell me three things about water supply in a fire: (1) go uphill; (2) go to the closest cross-street; and (3) don't tap the same water main too many times. Each of those basic rules of thumb were violated in this case – and that has little or nothing to do with our aging infrastructure.