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Fighting fire with funding

News Tempe Campus



Tempe Firehouse #1 is located on Apache Boulevard. A bill sponsored by U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell would provide fire departments with budget relief if it becomes law.(Molly Smith | The State Press)

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Arizona's fire departments could receive millions of dollars in funding to help retain personnel and equipment in the face of budget cutbacks if a bill sponsored by Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., passes the Senate.

The \$8.4 billion measure was approved in the U.S. House of Representatives Wednesday by a margin of 395-31. If signed into law, it would renew two federal programs, the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program, or AFG, and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response program, known as SAFER.

AFG provides funding for local fire departments to buy equipment and fund educational programs. SAFER provides funding for retention, recruitment and hiring personnel. Together, the two programs have accounted for more than \$38 million in funding to the fire departments across the state since 2005.

Adam Bozzi, a spokesman for Mitchell's office, said the two programs are particularly important at a time when cities are struggling to fund their fire departments because of sharp drops in revenue.

"Fire departments are important to keeping us safe, protecting our lives and property," Bozzi said. "But it's also an area local municipalities are struggling with at this time."

The Tempe Fire Department cut about \$400,000 from its budget of roughly \$27 million this year, according to Chief Cliff Jones. The cut, along with an additional \$376,000 since 2002, led to the elimination of two captain, three firefighter and two fire inspector positions, Jones said.

Tim Hill, president of the Professional Firefighters of Arizona, said departments are being hit by budget cuts at a time when services are needed.

"During bad economic times, fire departments actually get busier," Hill said. "But fire departments become a very rich target for city management types looking to cut a big chunk of the budget."

Much of the increased activity comes from families who lost insurance using emergency services for medical care. The high number of abandoned houses also increases the risk of fires significantly, he said.

"It's critical for the infrastructure of the community to keep fire departments [funded] and intact for the good of the overall community," Hill added.

The measure would increase the money allocated to departments under AFG as well as relax the local fund-matching requirements that mandate local governments to fund fire departments at a certain level in order to receive funds.

Although the measure enjoyed bipartisan support, Republican lawmakers representing Arizona, including Rep. Jeff Flake, uniformly voted against the measure. Matt Specht, a spokesman for Flake, said the congressman believes the legislation would lead local fire departments to rely too heavily on federal funding.

"Congressman Flake had objections to the overall cost of the bill ... and the fact that it expends federal funds on a function outside the purview of the federal government," Specht said in an e-mail.

The federal government has provided local fire departments with crucial funding at a time when local governments have had to cut back, Hill said.

"Cities and towns have had to make enormous cuts," he said. "That federal money is enormously important to us to continue to provide services the citizens need."

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