

## Fire station quietly closed - Station No. 2 will be used to house city's meter reading project

Ann Arbor News (MI) - Sunday, June 13, 2004

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The announcement never officially came, but Ann Arbor's **Fire Station** No. 2 has been closed.

It started with a staffing model to reduce overtime costs, and the station at **Packard** Street and Stadium Boulevard was closed on days when minimum staffing levels couldn't be met without using overtime. That proved to be nearly every day.

By November, it wasn't staffed at all. The trucks were moved to other stations, and when firefighters were asked to bid on station assignments, that location wasn't an option.

Firefighters were notified this month that a contractor for the city's automatic meter reading capital project soon will be moving into the first floor of the station. The contractor, which was promised city space as part of its agreement, is expected to be there more than a year, Fire Chief Joseph Gorman said.

"Station 2 was closed a long time ago, but I can't say exactly when," Gorman said. "There aren't any plans to reopen it in the future at this point, because we don't have the funds to staff it."

But Christopher Noonan, the secretary for the firefighters' union, said city officials would never answer the question of whether the station was officially closed or if it would ever reopen.

"They've never made it clear to the public," Noonan said.

The area once served by Station No. 2 is now served by several of the city's five other stations. Response times in the **Packard** -Stadium area have risen to an average of 6.3 minutes, according to union calculations. The average

response time in those areas before the changes was 2.5 minutes. Response times citywide have climbed to an average of 4.62 minutes, up from 4.14 minutes in 2002.

However, city officials say there currently is no reliable way to determine response times because the current system relies on handwritten times and not a computer. Fire response times will be tracked by computer when a new police-fire dispatch center opens next year.

Police Chief Daniel Oates, also the city's safety services manager, said he does not consider Station No. 2 permanently closed.

"We still have a fire department in transition," Oates said. "There are still a lot of issues that are unresolved and under negotiation. Down the road we may rethink what happens to that station, but right now it's not in use for fire department operations."

City officials said this January that Station No. 2 was closed 86 percent of the time last year. The program went into effect in January 2003 and was designed to reduce overtime costs by lowering the number of personnel on duty each day, if necessary.

Union members said Station No. 2 was only staffed 17 full days last year - 12 of those in January - and portions of 28 other days during the year. They said the station was open only 8.3 percent of the time in 2003.

Gorman said it's difficult to calculate the exact savings in the department's \$10.2 million budget as a result of the station closures. The plan also took an engine out of service when needed, and the minimum daily staffing level has dropped lower this year.

"We're now coming within the budget appropriations, but I don't have a dollar cost of what it takes to operate Station 2," Gorman said.

Last week, 10 firefighters and two dispatchers received layoff notices that take effect at the start of the next fiscal year July

1. But how that will affect minimum staffing levels or overtime costs remains unclear.

"It all depends on what happens in negotiations (this) week," Oates said. "I'm not going to speculate because it depends on what is achieved at the bargaining table."

Firefighters are clearing all their property from the bottom floor of Station No. 2, but the second floor will remain untouched. It has workout equipment and other items. The trucks were already moved out except for an antique fire truck, which will be brought downtown, Gorman said.

The Fire Department will no longer handle the utilities at the building while the contractor is there, which added up to \$7,898 in gas and electric last year, Gorman said in a memo. The police department also will store some equipment there.

The automated meter reading system is a \$6.8 million project approved by the city council this spring. Installation will begin this summer, and the city hopes to replace all 27,277 meters within a year.