



REQUEST FOR ACTION

FEMA SAFER Grant Application Submittal

MEETING DATE:

June 15, 2026

ORIGINATING DEPT:

Fire Department

AGENDA SECTION:

Reports and Recommendations

PRESENTER:

Chief Pooler

Action Requested:

Adopting a Resolution authorizing the Fire Department to apply for a FEMA SAFER grant to hire fifteen additional firefighters, helping to increase the department's effective response force to emergencies within Rochester.

Report Narrative:

The Fire Department is requesting authorization to apply for federal funding through the Fiscal Year 2025 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant program. If awarded, this grant would allow the department to hire 15 additional full-time firefighters, helping to meet increasing call-volume demands, reduce the overtime burden, and enhance the department's effective response force. The grant, if awarded, will provide federal cost-sharing over a three-year period covering approximately 59% of the total program cost. The grant application is due June 22nd, 2026, and supports the department's effort to improve operational efficiency and meet the growing demands of an expanding city and increasing vertical infrastructure.

Rochester continues to experience sustained growth, both through outward expansion of its city limits and through increased vertical development in its urban core. 33 multi-family projects are either currently active or in the pipeline for construction. These projects range in size from 3 to over 13 stories and from 10 to over 250 units. This increasing growth introduces unique operational challenges, including the need for specialized high-angle and vertical response capabilities, increased staffing for high-rise response tactics, and longer operational periods per incident. At the same time, the outward growth places additional demand on coverage areas and response times, particularly at the city's perimeter.

The primary operational purpose for these additional firefighters would be to increase daily department staffing, thereby enabling the department to deploy 28 firefighters to most fire incidents. Additionally, staffing on each of the department's two ladder trucks will be increased from 3 to 4. This proposal allows the ladder crew to be safely "split" into two functional two-person teams when conditions allow, creating a tactical advantage similar to having two traditional fire engines operating simultaneously at a scene.

This staffing increase also advances one of the key steps in the department's eight-step plan to relocate Engine 16 to a future northwest station. While this step is being addressed slightly out of sequence, it represents meaningful progress toward the broader operational vision. As the department continues to evaluate how best to respond to growing EMS call volume, the SAFER grant offers a timely opportunity to proactively strengthen our system and address multiple elements of the plan in parallel.

Historically, the SAFER grant application period opens earlier in the calendar year. However, for this cycle, the federal government remained shut down for much of the first and second quarter. For FY '25's program, the notice of funding was released May 19th, 2026, with the application window running from May 19th to June 22nd, 2026.

The revised SAFER grant provides a three-year cost-share program in which FEMA covers 75% of salary and benefits in years one and two and 35% in year three. Based on the estimated cost of a firefighter, the total projected federal contribution over the three-year period would significantly offset local costs.

If awarded, the department would have up to 180 days from the award date to complete hiring for the 15 new firefighters, providing flexibility to align recruitment and onboarding with operational and budgetary timelines. The 36-month grant period would begin after this 180-day period. Additionally, as a condition of the grant, the department would be required to maintain operational staffing levels to include the 15 SAFER-funded full-time equivalent (FTE) positions for the full duration of the three-year performance period. At the conclusion of the grant period, the City Council could decide to reapply for SAFER funding, fully absorb the positions into the local budget, or shed the positions through attrition. It is recommended that the positions be absorbed, as eventually, with the construction and operation of a new station in NW Rochester, personnel will be needed either to add an engine or, as is the goal, move Engine 16 from downtown.

The department is seeking approval for the application submission process with reduced notice due to the shortened timeframe and the June 22nd, 2026 deadline. Submitting the application does not entail an immediate financial obligation, and final acceptance would return to the Council for final approval.

Priorities & Foundational Principles:

Public Safety

Quality Services

Policy Considerations & DEI Impact:

By pursuing this funding, the department is advancing the City's strategic priorities. This grant would allow the City to increase public safety staffing and response while minimizing local tax impact over three years. Additionally, the increased staffing will help ensure that the fire department keeps pace with the community's population growth. Lastly, if awarded, the additional staffing would enable redeployment of existing resources to a new station and improve response times and community coverage.

Internally, the addition of new firefighter positions creates opportunities to diversify the department through hiring, outreach, and recruitment. This proposal is not anticipated to adversely impact our internal and external focus areas to be an inclusive community and organization.

Prior Legislative Actions & Community Engagement:

There are no prior legislative actions or community engagement on this item.

Fiscal & Resource Impact:

The estimated cost per new firefighter in year one is \$134,547.29, including salary and benefits. This figure reflects the cost of a first-year firefighter under current compensation schedules, assuming a family healthcare plan is selected. All projected costs and federal reimbursements are based on this baseline.

Under the revised SAFER grant structure:

Year 1: 75% federal share ≈ \$1,513,657.03

Year 1: 25% local match ≈ \$504,552.34

Year 2: 75% federal share ≈ \$1,513,657.03
Year 2: 25% local match ≈ \$600,26.05
Year 3: 35% federal share ≈ \$706,373.28
Year 3: 65% local match ≈ \$1,511,416.08
Total Estimated Federal Contribution (3 Years): ≈ \$3,733,687.35
Total Estimated Local Share (3 Years): ≈ \$2,616,694.48
Total Estimated Program Cost: ≈ \$6,350,381.82

It is important to note that the SAFER grant funding is tied to the cost of a first-year firefighter. Any contractual wage increases, step raises, or benefit changes occurring during the three-year period would result in additional costs beyond the federal reimbursement. Those increases have been factored into the local share calculations.

Even with the recent changes to the SAFER funding structure, this grant, if awarded, would still cover approximately 59% of the total costs of adding fifteen additional firefighters over a three-year period.

Alternative Action(s):

If the Council elects not to authorize submission of the SAFER grant application, it could consider funding eight firefighter positions in a future budget year to support four-person ladder company staffing. The Council could then continue working toward adding the remaining seven firefighter positions in future years, as resources allow.

Prepared By:

C Ferguson

Attachments:

[Presentation - FEMA SAFER Grant](#)

[Resolution - 2026 SAFER Grant Application](#)