

New Bedford Fire Union: Closing Engine 8 puts citizens and firefighters at risks

The following statement was released by Billy Sylvia the President of the New Bedford Firefighters Union – Local 841:

“Brothers and Sisters,

Mayor Mitchell has presented his budget for fiscal year 2021 along with an address to the City Council. In his address, he has announced his decision to decommission Engine 8 and run Ladder 4 as a Quint because of fiscal constraints resulting from the Covid-19 crisis. This decision was made without our input or support. We currently have no timeline on his plan to close Engine 8 because we just learned about this decision at the beginning of his address and during our monthly Union meeting. We will be meeting with the Chief and the Deputy tomorrow morning for more information. As we understand, there currently are no plans for any layoffs to our Department or any others.

Predictably, the Mayor claims that this closure of the apparatus in the most congested section of the City will not affect the Fire Department’s effectiveness or public safety. You know from your work as a firefighter this is not true. Engine 8 is the first-due water Company to the most densely populated area in the whole City. Closing Engine 8 puts citizens as well as our own firefighters at a disadvantage and increases our safety risks. Having a single Apparatus cover the North End from Coggeshall Street to Freetown, and in between Fairhaven and Dartmouth, while also covering the immediate area around Station 8 is reckless and irresponsible.

Just as with the closure of Engine 11 earlier this year, the closure of Engine 8 puts holes in our coverage and our availability to respond to emergencies. Apparatus has been pulled to the South End of the City daily and consistently to cover holes in coverage created by the Mayor's decommissioning of Engine 11. Closing Engine 8 will worsen the situation by leaving just one apparatus responsible for covering one of the busiest and most dangerous parts of the City. The closure unnecessarily increases the amount of time to get the proper number of firefighters to the scene of a fire. This compounds the problems created by the closure of Engine 11. This combined loss of coverage and the loss of precious seconds or minutes to respond to emergencies will make a difference only for the worse, whether concerning lives saved or property protected.

This action from the Mayor does not come as a surprise for any of us in our Department as we all know he has little respect, knowledge, or concern of how we operate or what we do. We are experiencing death by a thousand cuts. The Mayor, after all, continues to state there is no need for a Fire Department our size. He compares the professional and permanent Fire Department of one of Massachusetts' oldest urban centers to surrounding rural areas such as Dartmouth, Fairhaven, and Acushnet. Anyone can see there is a huge difference in population, by tens of thousands, and in housing stock, which is much older and more densely populated housing in New Bedford. To compare our Department and operations to any town with less than a quarter of our population, with completely different geographical layout, and with smaller, disbursed housing is foolish and irresponsible.

Every single employee in our department from the top down, no matter who, is just a dollar sign in the Mayor's eyes as he looks to where and how he can cut the Fire Department at the expense of fire safety. After two fatal fires at the end of last year, the Mayor refused to accept responsibility for the

tragedies, for the reduced fire safety policies caused by prioritizing price tags. He spit in the face of everyone including our members by closing Engine 11 at the beginning of a global pandemic that was just starting to reach us. His cuts to apparatus and service put the public's safety along with our own in danger. Our safety is further jeopardized by the announcement of Engine 8's closure. Our Brothers and Sisters will continue to help and protect the public as best we can day in and day out, but if or when a tragedy occurs despite our collective best efforts, we will remind the public that the buck stops with Mayor Mitchell.

Just as the Mayor has done in the past, we can assume that he will try to mislead the people of our City on how cuts to fire safety coverage benefits them or suggest that the Department will maintain operational readiness despite losing another Engine and one of our busiest apparatus. All of you know first hand on what and who it takes to perform our jobs safely and efficiently and how these cuts directly affect our operations every day. This is why we will need every single one of you when called upon to let your voices be heard and fight back to protect our department and our safety. You can be sure that this second apparatus closure in six months is not the end with his attack against us and every other public employee. We will stand tall and strong together, to show the Mayor we will not sit quietly while he puts the lives of the public and our own at risk through his irresponsible leadership of the Fire Department.

In Solidarity,
Local 841 Leadership"