

CSFN July 2017 General Assembly Presentation
by Assistant Deputy Chief Anthony Rivera
on Fire Department and Emergency Response
Issues with Street Improvements

Q and A following the presentation:

Q: Ozzie: What does it take to get rid of these bulbouts?

A: That is a great question. The Fire Department does not install the bulbouts. They are installed by DPW under order by MTA. When the first bulbouts went in the Fire Department didn't even know what they were. They got installed. We started having problems driving over them or not being able to make the turn.

Since then MTA has started reducing the size of the newer bulbouts so that we can make the turns. In terms of having them removed I think that is something that would have to be legislated by the Board of supervisors. We can't control that. We can only give input into what is happening with our vehicles.

Q Lizzie: Are you ever consulted by the MTA before they do any of this?

A: That is a great question too. A lot of these issues bug me, but I am here to represent the Fire Department. We are part of the approval process, but there are a lot of challenges for us. A lot of times we are the only ones speaking out and we don't get a lot of support, but, with that being said we definitely are committed to work with other departments and make sure that our voice is being heard.

Q Mari: I understand that an appeal has been filed on some of the design on Upper Market that has to do with your needs for the overhead wires. Could you describe a little bit of the technical aspect of this. Are the overhead wires always the same? Are they the same heights? Are they different distances from buildings. What is your concern about that?

A: That is correct. The Upper Market project when we were originally given that project by MTA, the first thing that popped off the page was the overhead wires and also there is a center

median there. That means if there is a fire, everyone has to go onto the side where the fire is. You can't cross the street. There is a light rail, Muni, and the overhead wires.

There is a Cal OSHA regulation code that you cannot operate an arial ladder within 10 feet of overhead energized wires. Within our Fire Department, we trained all our drivers. You have to stay away from that. If it is a really rainy night and you are 10 feet or so away, you can still get an arch, get arched out. Our arial ladders are made of steel so obviously they are conducive to electrical. So that was one of the issues we originally had. We said that we were not against the bike lanes or any other part of the proposal. We had a concern with the parking protected bike lanes because it pushed out arial trucks almost underneath the overhead wires.

We had Supervisor Jeff Sheefy come out on a rainy day and he saw the vehicle set up. We also did a demonstration for Supervisor Jane Kim on Turk Street which is similar to Upper Market but Turk Street is a one way street and Market was, because of the median, it is more narrow and on

a hill. So those are additional challenges. In terms of the CEQA appeal, (filed by David Pilpel) it was voted on by the Board of Supervisors recently and it was not upheld. So I believe that the project is moving forward. We still do not approve of the project.

Q: Mari: A number of people are very concerned about access to General Hospital and I watched some versions of the fire trucks trying to get into that area. I photographed the some of those operations and I was very alarmed by what we have now. Is there any way the public can work to try to solve some of these problems? Is there anything going on? Is't this alarming?

A: It is alarming thank you, but. That is kind of along the line of the bulbouts. This would be something the District Supervisors would be able to bring the departments together. I will say though that we are working with MTA to try to address the issue.

I will give you little bit of background. That project was approved in 2014 by the Fire Department. It was one of many projects that was approved

and, we are human, we look at a set of proposed plans and we think, well, maybe this is going to work. Well, that was four years ago. Traffic has gone through the roof since then.

Also the entrance to the emergency room was changed from 23rd to 22nd. At the time the plans were approved, that was not the entrance to the emergency room. I was not the Chief at that time of support services, but, the Chief at that time felt that we are still going to use 23rd Street, this is going to be a very minor impact, and we could always use San Bruno. There are some adjacent streets that can be used in case Potrero was backed up. Now the emergency room has been moved to 22nd street. We do have concerns. We are talking with MTA at this time trying to get our concerns addressed. It's challenging and we are trying to work within departments to get this fixed.

Q: Mari: Are the medians where they are located now part of the problem or are there some other issues? I know there are no overhead wires there, but, is there any particular item or is it just the fact that they moved it?

A: I'm not a traffic engineer. I would say I made three site visits because of citizens complaints, and then we have had some complaints by some of our ambulance drivers and it seems to me that one of the main reasons is these center medians. We used to have the ability to drive into on-coming traffic to go into the emergency room but now because of the center medians we don't have that capability and it is pretty tight. There is not really an area for traffic to move to and I think traffic is also just a lot heavier there than what it has been in the past. You can get pretty backed up. I think we are feeling the issue there and in my opinion it is probably because of the center medians, but, someone from engineering needs to look at that.

Q: Penny: Vision Zero started in Europe. Have you had any contact with fire departments there? Do they have problems that you share?

A: I have not had contact with any fire departments. I know that in Europe they have a completely different style of fire fighting. San Francisco has a very unique fire engine and fire

truck. Our specifications are so unique that there are manufacturers that will not even bid on it. We have the hills. We have to bring water to the fire so we carry water on our fire engines. Because of the hills we need the higher horse power engine to make it up. An average engine from the midwest would't even make it up our hills. We have very specific fire engines. The brakes are the largest brakes available for a large vehicle because we have to hold all that weight going up the hills, so I think even if there was another department, we are so unique it is hard to compare. I know a lot of times they say, "New York does this, well we're not New York. We don't use the same tools. We use fire fighting tools that were designed here in San Francisco for our own buildings. We can't just go to a catalogue and order items. We have very specific requirements.

Q: What interest groups are pushing you?

A: I hear you and I know where you are going with this. I hear you as a citizen, but, I have to remark as a representative of the Fire Department. We are having challenges, but at the

end of the day, when that alarm goes off, if it is a pedestrian, a bicyclist, or someone in a car we are going to show up and do our best. We are there for public safety for everyone. We understand how things get very difficult. It is our goal to respond to everyone and keep things safe for everyone.

Q: Kathy: Can you tell us factually whether San Francisco FDA gets any grants or any other financial remuneration from MTC , ABAG, or any other agency if you know.

A: That is a juicy question. I don't know that, but, as a citizen I would like to know. In my capacity I am usually the representative for the Fire Department when it comes to vehicles and our facilities, but in terms of that, it sounds more like the money involvement and I don't know that answer.

Q: Eileen, I'm actually asking in someone else's behalf. Is there one person in the Fire Department who is the liaison or point person with the MTA whether it is ongoing or emergency response or some other?

A: Yes, we do have a person, Olivia Scanlon is our liaison for public outreach and government issues. She is very good to work with. She has a lot of contacts and she has been helping us a lot to resolve some of our issues with other departments.

Q: Darren: Is SFMTA doing anything when you have these issues and how can we support your concerns? How do we put pressure on SFMTA and say, look, fighting fires is as important as Vision Zero and maybe more important than Vision Zero.

A: I would say, probably contact Olivia Scanlon. she is our civilian liaison. She has gone to all these departments and she is probably the best person to answer that. I can give your the specifications of the fire truck.

Q: Darren: Is MTA saying they will actually change something or are they just saying, ok. Thank you very much.

A: Usually what happens with a project like Upper

Market, we'll get the project, it goes to Lt Fettigan first. she looks at an area that she may have concerns about and then it goes to our fire marshal to see if there are any code violations. I also take a look and may say, our arial truck can't work here or our fire engines or ambulances can't make this turn. then it goes to our operational chief. Operational Chief may say, this is something new, let me talk to my battalion chiefs and see if we can deal with this. Once all that information is gathered, it is given back to the MTA. I don't know how it is resolved. I just give my opinion in terms of what your vehicles can do.

Q: They don't get back to you and say, yeah, we are going to make a change.

A: Sometimes they do. It is kind of a negotiation. And sometimes it goes up the chain. There are a lot of projects gong on right now. The way our department is set up, we are designed to validate so many projects. There is so much going on down at DBI they have lines out the door. We have so much staffing that we can deal with these issues.

Q: Claire: You are talking about these bulbouts and these things in the street. but what you haven't mentioned is the cost to the department and to the taxpayers for all the new equipment you need. What is the damage that is done on your fire trucks, your engines, your ambulances and all the other equipment that regularly responds.

A: That is a very good question. Yes, our vehicles have been damaged. Our vehicles are designed to drive over a maximum 4" curb. A lot of the bulbouts are 6" so when we do drive over them, we have had broken springs, bent rims, cracked frames. We have to pay more out of our own budget. yes, there has been damage to the vehicles and I have a lot of sides to show that also.

Q: Oliva's email?

A: Oliva's email: Olivia.scanlon@sfgov.org

Q: John, I'm a neighbor on Potrero Avenue. Two questions. You just mentioned that your trucks are designed to go over a 2" curb. Does the

SFMT not have those specifications?

A: They are aware of it. I believe that it is part of a DPW issue, so DPW installs the curbs. They have limitations of what they use and what they can install. Things that you want to make clear is that if there is a mountable curb where we can drive onto it, pedestrians need to know that that it is mountable. We don't want Mom and her kids standing on the corner and we are coming by in a big truck, so there is a fine line to where we can have mountable curbs and where they can't be. We have discussed it with MTA about what our requirements are.

Q: John: People have asked if MTA is responsive, my answer at least on Potrero Ave. is they listen and say they will take it into consideration but their issue on Potrero Avenue they say is pedestrian safety but, patients should be able to get to hospital safely and you could have a little refuge in the middle of the street. you don't need a median in the middle of the block and that is preventing your ambulances from coming into incoming traffic. I'm sure you have seen the video of ambulances stuck in traffic. Both those

medians between 21st and 22nd and 22nd and 23rd, they need to go. It is a very simple answer.

A: I hear your frustration. I think that may be something a District Supervisor can get involved in. It seems like they have a lot more clout. We are trying to work with MTA to see if there is a way to resolve that issue. I don't know what the answer is.

Q: Rose: Of all the traffic calming features, speed bumps, traffic circles, cables, whatever, which is the worse thing that hampers our personnel.

A: In my opinion, gosh, I would say that they are all designed to slow traffic down, which they do and it is hard for us to recover. I'd say the worst is the parking protected bike lanes because that actually adds another layer of challenge for our members showing up. When the fire fighters show up to a fire, if they are sizing up the scene, figuring out where they are going to put the ladders, where are we going to take the hose and by pushing out the cars that far, for us, you are almost saying "ok you are going to use ground ladders instead of arial ladders, and some of our

ground ladders cannot reach the height of the aerial, so in my opinion, that is the most difficult.

Q: Chris: When you had the major fire in Mission Bay we heard that you used 10 million gallons of water from an auxiliary water source and that is Hetch Hetchy water. The question is how much water do you use typically in a day? Do you have any stats on that?

A: I can probably get you that information. I don't have it readily available. I will say that at that fire in Mission Bay it was an extremely large fire and we did use AWSS which are large reservoirs throughout the city and we had to pump water for probably about four days. Even though the initial fire was out we had a lot of smoldering. We had to be very careful. So we had our pipes going for quite a while. But I could get you that information sir.

Q: Lisa: One thing that hasn't been brought up yet is that we are considering Vision Zero but what are the obstacle for you like bike racks, parklets, and other obstacle that protrude out into the street. When the MTA splashes red paint all

over Mission Street and re-directs traffic onto the small streets, where there is parking on both sides and one lane either way, what is the solution to working together and saying, “We’re not getting through”? They start these pilot projects and say, we’ll try it for a while and see. What about saying this is too much congestion. We can’t get through with emergency vehicles?

A: I don’t have a simple answer of that question. I hear a lot of frustration in that question and in terms of our department I think we are committed to try to work with the departments. That would be a question for a supervisor or someone who will be able to oversee that and make decisions for the neighborhood.

Comment: Ozzie: MTA seems to be the core subject. It seems that we can easily organize and go to the Supervisors and express our distain because going to the MTA board is not going to do any good. I’m willing to organize. (39:52)

Comment: Kathy, I think the problem is Ozzie that the MTA Board, the budget is not something that the Board can cut. They have to vote it up or

down. They never say know because they would not have a budget. So what we should do is ask that the Charter be amended. Also we should look into all these grants. I was at ABAG and they started out this meeting with the good news is that there is 16 billion in federal transportation money. And then they go into all these grants that they expect to get. The room is full of consultants, so they are doing it for money and MTA is growing by these grants and they have a separate commission that is separate from the Board of Supervisors. And so we need to bring them under the control, we need to change the Charter, bring them back under the control of the board so that we can exert pressure on the Board. On the other hand, half the supervisors are on the Board and do nothing. So then you have got to exert some other kind of pressure on the supervisors.

Comment: George, This is a very valid point.

Comment: Mayo, Retired Fire Fighter: I just sort of wanted to express, being a retired fire fighter, that one of the things Tony talked about... I think one of the things that is important that I

remember is that we had a response time. When an emergency came in from the time we received a call and arrived at the scene of the incident, and the officer checks in, that time is checked at radio. You have heard the sad stories about that... When response time is grows, it talks to everyone. It talks to the streets. The Chief has those statistics. If those statistics go from a two minute to a three minute response time, we hear from the public. And if the Chief knows that the Chief is going to make the complaint to the city departments. This is what Tony is part of. The response time is very very important. There is a distance factor but there is also an encumbrance factor that occurs and if that happens and becomes a problem the Chief will ask you.

Q: Lisa, where do you get the response times?

A: All the response times are at Department of Emergency Services right down the street here. They keep very accurate times of how long it takes the fire engine ambulance to get on the scene. We are mandated by the state of California, a DMS agent, to be at patient's side within a certain amount of time. I don't have that

number with me right now, but, we keep track and can tell you within a percentile if we are meeting the goal or not. We have to keep accurate records of that.

George: We can extend this if you like.

A: I totally sense the frustration as citizens that you guys have but honestly there is a lot of these questions I truly shouldn't answer and I don't have the answer. I feel bad.

Q; Tony, I have a question about that response time. How about when the ambulance picks you up and then takes you to the hospital. Is that time recorded?

A: That time also is recorded. Everything is recorded and kept so that we can be evaluated by the state.

Q: Are they going down?

A: I have not checked the response times lately. I think it was maybe two years ago we were having a really bad issue with response times. I don't

know the latest statistics. That falls under operations so I don't look at that report daily. I don't look at that. You can probably sunshine all that information.

Q: Glenn: If all of these things are stopping you from being able to get to an emergency on time, and your response time is going up... as Tony has suggested, would you be kind enough to complain and get this problem corrected, please.

George: I think it is incumbent on us to organize like what we were talking about earlier and help him, especially as SFMTA and DPW are going to be acting independently screwing things up. Now I have a question. How many engines have been ordered?

A: We have ordered 8 new engines. They should be arriving in a couple of months. Eight new fire engines.

Q: George: You purchased 13 prior?

A: Prior to that we had an order of 10 engines in 2014.

Q: George: So the obvious place I'm going is some of them aren't that old and are probably in great running condition. You have the new engines coming in. How will you coordinate that, because the older engines have to be able to handle the situation that we have been talking about all night even though the newer ones may be better equipped to handle the situation. Are you going to have to retire some of them?

A: Yes, the newer engines have better turning radiuses than the older models. Usually when we purchase new engines, 8 for the last ten purchased, we usually take the oldest out of the fleet. We are required by the city to only have a certain amount in our fleet. When we get one brand new engine, one of the old ones has to be retired. That is just the way the city works. The eight new ones coming in we will probably put eight out to pasture. It is usually the oldest ones.

Q: Lisa: Will you sell them?

A: The city has a policy for all the vehicles. They get auctioned off. We are able to take off the light

bar, the siren, the radios. But then the vehicle goes to an auction house. I want to say the money goes back to the general fund but I'm not sure.

George: I want to thank you. This is so informative. I want to thank you for even the questions you couldn't answer, because I understand. A lot of politics in the city. You have to be very maneuverable.