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## **“THE CITY THAT WORKS”: PRIVATIZING PUBLIC FIRE PROTECTION**

by Richard Schulte

Chicago is known as “The City That Works”, but there is a big problem in Windy City right now. It’s a problem that many cities, counties and states across America are encountering these days-budget problems. The City of Chicago has already leased the Chicago Skyway and its parking meters to private companies in exchange for one time up-front payments and has already spent that money. With the recession, revenue to the City is down, but costs are the same or increasing.

Rather than make the difficult decisions on how to cut the budget, the mayor of the City, Mayor Richard M. Daley, announced on Tuesday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, that it’s time to step down. After 20<sup>+</sup> years, Chicago will have a new mayor next year.

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In the mist of discussing who will replace the Mayor, the issue of privatization of city services came up as a means of reducing the cost of city government. One of the proposals that was discussed was the privatization of Midway Airport. That proposal has been put forth before, but something new on the table was the privatization of the Chicago Fire Department.

Privatized fire protection is nothing new in the United States. One company that provides such service is Rural/Metro Corporation. The following excerpts are from Rural/Metro’s website:

*“With the company was also born a new way of thinking about health and safety services. As a private sector company, Rural/Metro is dedicated to finding the most cost-effective ways to deliver the highest quality ambulance transportation and private fire protection services.”*

*“What began with one man's vision has grown today into a company with approximately \$500 million in annual revenues and more than 8,000 employees who provide health and safety services throughout the United States. Annually, Rural/Metro's employees respond to more than 1 million calls for assistance.”*

One community which has experience with utilizing Rural/Metro Corporation's services is Scottsdale, Arizona. Of course, Scottsdale, Arizona is famous in the fire protection field because it is one of the first communities in the United States to adopt an ordinance mandating that new single-family dwellings be protected by a sprinkler system. The purpose of this ordinance was to not only to try to reduce the number of fire fatalities occurring in single-family dwellings, but to also reduce public fire protection costs. In other words, one of the purposes of the ordinance was to substitute private fire protection as an alternative to public fire protection.

*“. . .Rural/Metro is dedicated to finding the most cost-effective ways to deliver the highest quality ambulance transportation and private fire protection services.”*

An article about Rural/Metro Corporation's operations in Scottsdale titled *“Scottsdale fire department routine to change”* appeared on the East Valley Tribune website on June 26, 2005, with an update on the story on March 10, 2010. Excerpts from this article include the following:

*“Rural/Metro Fire Department, Scottsdale's homegrown emergency-services company, is ending its contract with the city after more than 50 years of service.”*

*“In 2003, the firefighters launched a voter initiative, funded by their unions, to oust Rural/Metro.”*

*“Scottsdale voters overwhelmingly rejected it, and then, six months later, the company announced it was leaving on its own. The decision was made, in part, because the company said it could no longer provide cost effective services for such a growing, increasingly urbanized city.”*

*“Rural/Metro Fire Department, Scottsdale's homegrown emergency-services company, is ending its contract with the city after more than 50 years of service.”*

*“Rural/Metro operates its engines with three firefighters on them. Its dispatch system is not linked to neighboring municipal fire departments.”*

*“With a Scottsdale department, a majority of the engines will run with four firefighters, and the city is joining a Valleywide dispatch system.”*

Based upon Rural/Metro’s experience in Scottsdale, it doesn’t appear that complete privatization of public fire protection services would work in Chicago, however, we do know from Rural/Metro’s experience in Scottsdale that providing sprinkler protection in dwellings is an efficient way of protecting the public from fire.

. . .the need for more public fire protection resources would begin to dwindle-not to mention that the most effective means of protecting lives and property is sprinkler protection.

Given the number of existing dwellings in the City of Chicago, reductions in the need for public fire protection services would be minimal at first, but as the percentage of dwellings provided with sprinkler protection increased over the years, the need for more public fire protection resources would begin to dwindle-not to mention that the most effective means of protecting lives and property is sprinkler protection.

A requirement to provide sprinkler protection in new dwellings in the City of Chicago would not be a “magic bullet” for the City’s present budget woes, but would be a part of a long-term solution to reducing the cost of providing public fire protection and reducing the cost of government, not to mention that sprinkler protection makes fire fighting safer. Enacting a dwelling sprinkler ordinance in the City of Chicago should be a “win-win” situation for Chicago’s taxpayers and Chicago’s fire fighters.

Is sprinkler protection in dwellings the answer to the problem of the cost of public fire protection. You bet ya!

You build it, you protect it. Hopefully, if Chicago were to adopt such an ordinance, the City would also adopt a sufficient number of “trade-offs” to keep the cost of providing sprinkler protection in dwellings reasonable. Is sprinkler protection in dwellings the answer to the problem of the cost of public fire protection. You bet ya!

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