

Extra use of fire trucks questioned amid high gas prices

By Brian Meyer NEWS STAFF REPORTER
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When an Ellicott District resident spotted the same fire truck cruising down West Chippewa Street at least four times in the same night, she wrote to City Hall for answers.

Other people have raised similar questions about roving fire trucks that are clearly not racing to emergencies, city officials said Friday.

With gasoline topping \$4 a gallon, the spotlight is focused on the use of government fleets. And fire trucks are among the least fuel-efficient city vehicles.

Mayor Byron W. Brown had his accountability panel review the issue. After a brief discussion, some CitiStat officials said they want more information about the Fire Department's policy regarding the use of vehicles. Furthermore, they said the policy should be clearly conveyed to residents.

Deputy Fire Commissioner Patrick

T. Lewis said department officials keep close tabs on the use of fire trucks and would know right away if there was any abuse. He said trucks that are seen in neighborhoods are often involved in training, a fact that was later stressed by Joseph E. Foley, fire union president.

It's critical for firefighters to be familiar with the neighborhoods they're assigned to protect, including street grids and structures, Foley said.

"We save lives," he said. "Would you prefer we not be ready to save lives?"

It's not against the rules for firefighters to use trucks to pick up food when they're on duty. But Foley said most food runs are done when crews are already in the trucks performing city tasks. Firefighters making special food runs in fire vehicles is "rare," he said.

Lewis thinks it's good for crews to maintain a high profile in neighborhoods.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with having the Fire Department out there for the public to see," the deputy commissioner said.

City Corporation Counsel Alisa A. Lukasiewicz agreed, saying she "finds comfort" in seeing fire trucks pass her home.

First Deputy Mayor Steven M. Casey added that firefighters often attend block club meetings and make appearances at neighborhood events. Having firefighters in the community is better than having them "sit around a firehouse," Casey said.

But Finance Commissioner Janet Penksa said that with Fire Department overtime reeling out of control, it's important to search for ways to economize. Most other departments are within budget, said Penksa. If there's any department that could "set the city back" financially, it's fire, she lamented.

CitiStat officials could revisit the issue when fire officials meet with the panel again Sept. 5.