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**Money to burn;
'Tradition' and culture costing Boston millions of dollars;
A DEPARTMENT UNDER FIRE;
First of three parts;
Globe photographer John Tlumacki contributed to this story.**

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Shortly after noon on a warm winter day last month, Boston firefighter James Sullivan opened the rear door to a black sedan with distinctive "Fire 1" license plates and ordered a golden retriever to hop out.

Once out of the car, Sullivan commanded the dog to sit. When the dog obeyed, she was rewarded with a treat.

Taking care of "Bailey" is one of the tasks performed by Sullivan and three other firefighters who work full time as chauffeurs to Boston Fire Commissioner Martin E. Pierce Jr.

On this day, Sullivan brought the commissioner's dog with him on a trip to South Boston while Pierce stayed behind at headquarters. At an apartment complex, Sullivan stopped to pick up his mother and sister, and drove them to a neighborhood health clinic. After dropping off the women, Sullivan and the dog, sitting upright in the back seat, continued on through the streets of South Boston in the Fire Department's \$29,400 Ford Crown Victoria LX sedan.

Pierce's drivers have plenty of time to dog-sit because they are infrequently needed for their primary responsibility: safely and quickly delivering the commissioner to the scene of multiple-alarm fires.

Much has changed about the nature of fires in Boston. Since 1986, fires in the city have decreased by more than half, mainly because of new laws mandating sprinkler systems, smoke detectors, and tougher building codes.

But the Boston Fire Department has been slow to adapt to its changed mission. In the movie "Backdraft," based on life at a Chicago firehouse, a banner proclaimed the department's motto, which critics say could easily be Boston's: "150 years of tradition unimpeded by progress."

Hidebound by a rigid set of customs and rooted in a culture that both discourages innovation and promotes waste, the Boston department each year spends millions of dollars to staff units and maintain systems that no longer serve a vital public safety interest.

Pierce has largely ignored the advice of various management consultants who have sought to modernize and streamline an organization they concluded is laced with bloat, perks, and pork.

Many of the perks Pierce prizes for himself. The cost of having four drivers on constant alert for the commissioner is at least \$240,000 a year in salaries - which translated to \$17,142 for every major fire the commissioner was driven to last year. As commissioner, Pierce responds to all fires of three alarms or more and assumes command upon his arrival.

The drivers, called aides by the department, also shuttle Pierce to out-of-town hockey rinks where he removes his fire hat and grabs a whistle to coach the varsity squad at perennial schoolboy hockey power Matignon High School in Cambridge. On weekends, they pick him up at his home and escort him on personal errands. In addition, Pierce has a second official car that he keeps at home for private use, including driving to Cape Cod.

Below the commissioner's level, every one of the department's 58 district chiefs has a firefighter assigned to him as a full-time aide and chauffeur.

Last year, one fire unit, staffed by 20 firefighters, responded to an average of fewer than three calls a week. On two out of four recent afternoon visits a Globe photographer and reporter made to the unit, firefighters lay asleep on couches and chairs in front of a television set.

Meanwhile, the Fire Department's \$114 million annual budget is increasing faster than the rest of the city budget, and the amount of overtime handed out to firefighters has doubled in the past four years.

Most of the overtime is to cover shifts left undermanned by firefighters out with injuries, an increasing problem which officials fear is being exacerbated by malingering. Last year, 22 members of the department earned more than \$100,000 in salary and overtime and more than 100 were paid in excess of \$80,000.

Yet there is little pressure for change. Mayor Thomas M. Menino, like others before him, has been reluctant to take on the department and the powerful union that represents the 1,592 firefighters. In an interview, Menino acknowledged he could be more aggressive in pushing change.

"The Fire Department is a sacred cow in this city," said Jeffrey W. Conley, executive director of the Boston Finance Commission, an agency that has studied Fire Department spending. "If you look at the way the Fire Department has done business the last 10 years, there have been no changes. Organizations need to change with the times."

Prepared for a threat that's been diminished

Iron men and wooden ladders.

It's a phrase that refers to an era when the Fire Department did nothing but fight fires, and at a rate that far exceeds anything experienced by today's Boston firefighter. In those days, a fireman was judged solely on how well "he operated the pipe," or water hose, and if he was a good "jake," or firefighter.

Critics of Pierce maintain that the commissioner operates the department based on the tradition of a long-gone era and against a threat that has greatly diminished. It is this philosophy that results in waste and mismanagement, they say.

"The department is so steeped in tradition it is ridiculous," said John White, who retired in 1997 after serving as the second-highest officer in the department. "They are waiting for the big one to occur."

Today, only one in 36 calls to the department is for a building fire; 40 percent are for medical emergencies. Another 30 percent end up being false alarms.

Several high-ranking fire officials say privately they are frustrated in their attempts to develop new programs or strategies for the department, frequently being told by Pierce, "That is not the way we have done it."

In an interview, Pierce challenged such criticism and said the department is adjusting to change, placing new emphasis on preventing fires as opposed to just putting them out.

"Prevention I certainly believe in. Public education. . . . That's a big thing," he said. Pierce said he has solicited local businesses to aid with fire education projects and recently added two engineers to review fire prevention plans in the city.

Yet the department has failed to act on recommendations in recent years that would have saved the city millions of dollars. Many of the changes directly address the decrease in fires and the changing demands on firefighters.

In 1995, a team of fire experts working for the MMA Consulting Group Inc., offered numerous recommendations for saving money and improving management.

They said the number of fire districts in the city should be reduced from 11 to 10, eliminating four highly-paid district chiefs and administrative costs; manpower at overstuffed and non-vital firehouses should be cut; the costly system of fire alarm boxes on telephone poles should be eliminated; the practice of assigning firefighters to maintain fire trucks, even though most of that work is covered by manufacturers' warranty, should be stopped; and a system of light duty including inspections and desk jobs should be created to get injured firefighters back to work.

None of those recommendations has been implemented, although Pierce has cut the number of firefighters assigned to maintaining trucks, and supports the concept of light duty.

The experts proposed spending some of the money saved from cutting costly programs and unnecessary units to increase the number of inspections.

Similarly, a 1994 review of the department by the Boston Finance Commission made many of the same recommendations. The FinCom also questioned several benefits given to firefighters, including hazardous-duty and night-differential pay for those working desk jobs during the day at Fire Department headquarters - a practice that continues today.

Pierce is unapologetic about his decision to ignore recommendations by outside experts. "I believe in our oath to protect the public," he said. "I'm trying to do that."

Pierce does get credit for maintaining good response times and making the purchase of modern equipment a priority, complete with fully-staffed units that perform well when called upon.

"On the plus side, he wants the best equipment for his guys, wants maximum staffing for his people, and keeps them at minimum amount of risk. Those are pluses," said Conley. "On the downside, he hasn't been able to reconcile the reality that there are far fewer fires today."

Department salaries outpace rate of inflation

Old-timers in the department vividly remember the days in the '60s when fires plagued the city and their reward at the end of the week was a check for \$116. Last year, 90 percent of the force earned \$50,000 a year - an increase that far exceeds the rate of inflation during those three decades. A first-year Boston firefighter's base salary is \$36,452, and after five years, \$49,036. Boston's first-year pay is among the highest in the nation: In New York, the figure is \$29,000, Chicago, \$33,500; Philadelphia, \$28,511; and Detroit, \$25,000.

Boston's top earner was Kevin MacCurtain, deputy commissioner for operations, who was paid \$120,801. Pierce received a salary of \$118,197.

Firefighters have won generous salary and benefit increases in recent years, but are also supplementing their salaries with so-called fire details. Much like the Boston Police Department, the Fire Department assigns personnel to work for private companies, mostly at construction sites and events with large crowds.

In the first 11 months of last year, firefighters earned \$2.5 million in fire-detail pay; some earned up to \$20,000 by working details. The amount has been increasing steadily since 1994, when firefighters earned \$868,000 in detail work.

At construction sites, firefighters post "fire watches" where they look for fire hazards. If a fire breaks out, the firefighter on detail is expected to do everything possible to control or extinguish it, as well as call for assistance. Other times, firefighters are assigned details at theaters, sporting venues, and exhibition halls to prevent overcrowding and ensure exits are not blocked.

Although fire details are not unique to Boston, several national construction companies said the practice is more prevalent here. It is up to district chiefs to decide how many firefighters work a detail and which sites require them. On some large construction sites it is not uncommon to have a dozen or more firefighters working a detail at the same time.

Yet the cost-effectiveness is dubious. The department said it doesn't know how many fires have been called in by a detail firefighter in the past three years.

MacCurtain, however, said it is hard to measure the effectiveness of the details that way because several fires have been prevented before they could begin by firefighters pointing out hazards. "I believe strongly in this," he said. "They are preventing fires."

All's quiet with Marine Unit

On the same day firefighter Sullivan was caring for the commissioner's dog, the men who staff the Fire Department's Marine Unit in Boston's North End were hardly working.

At 2 p.m. that day, a firefighter lay asleep on a couch with his feet up and his shoes off. On a chair nearby, another firefighter slept with a newspaper resting on his lap. The television was on, but no one appeared to be watching. The same scene was repeated on another afternoon visit late last year.

The Marine Unit is housed on the bottom floor of a luxury condominium building at Burroughs Wharf. Penthouse units in the building sell for close to \$1 million. The glass-enclosed Marine Unit quarters offer a panoramic view of Boston Harbor and Logan Airport. The two fireboats that the unit uses to respond to calls in and around the waterfront are tied up nearby.

The Marine Unit often goes several days without making a single run. For three months last year, the main fireboat was out of service for repairs. Assignment to the unit is one of the most sought after in the department, with only the most senior firefighters stationed there.

It is staffed by five firefighters around the clock. Salaries alone amount to at least \$1.2 million a year.

It is money poorly spent, according to a 1995 audit of the department by fire experts from around the country. The experts said manpower of the unit could be reduced by 60 percent, with no impact on public safety. If more firefighters were needed to staff the unit during an emergency situation, the experts said, they could be sent from the nearby Hanover Street firehouse.

But Pierce has ignored the recommendation, saying he worries that firefighters from Hanover Street could be delayed by construction or traffic if called to aid the Marine Unit. In addition, he said increased activity in the harbor, including the addition of commuter boats, justifies the need for staffing. "If they wait for an engine to respond, it could be minutes before that could happen," he said. "It is a delay that could be costly."

Yet, in the past three years, the unit has been first on the scene to only two fires - both of such minor consequence that department regulations did not require filing of a fire incident report. Conley, of Boston FinCom, said the Hanover Street firehouse is so close "those guys could walk to the Marine Unit if there was traffic."

If there is an assignment considered softer than the Marine Unit it is the firehouse at Long Island in Boston Harbor. Called the Fire Brigade by the department, the cushiness of this assignment is legendary among firefighters.

"If you go to the Fire Brigade, they tell you to bring your pajamas," said one firefighter, who asked not to be identified.

The 16-man Fire Brigade is also unique because assignment to the unit is at the discretion of Pierce. The perception among many firefighters is you have to be connected to a politician or the commissioner to end up at Long Island.

Pierce conceded there "might be occasions" where politicians request a firefighter be sent to the island, and he said it is a place for older firefighters nearing retirement age. "I have some firefighters who have been in busy, busy companies," Pierce said. "Maybe you'd call it a way of saying thanks to them."

At one time, Long Island was the site of a large city hospital for the chronically ill. Today, many of the buildings on the island are abandoned and in a state of decay. What remains is a homeless shelter and a small number of city offices. In the middle of the sprawling former hospital campus sits a two-story red-brick building with an aging fire engine inside. A satellite dish is mounted on the side of the building to help pass the time.

In the past three years, the unit has responded to three building fires. All three were extinguished without the use of a fire truck or fire hose.

On average, the unit is called out of the station only once every five days and a third of those calls end up being

false alarms. Most of the other calls are for medical assistance. The Fire Department doesn't even include the Fire Brigade in its annual listing of calls made by every unit in the city.

The outside fire experts conducting the 1995 audit said the unit should be scrapped and its 16 firefighters reassigned.

Pierce, however, said he has no plans to close the unit. "I would rather have a presence down there," he said.

The last time the city shut down a fire unit was 1981. The department says closing additional firehouses would compromise safety. In addition, since fire stations are prized in the neighborhoods, closing them is politically difficult.

Department, union quick to wield political clout

Mayor Menino learned the price of angering the city's firefighters and their union early in his first term.

Menino followed former Mayor Raymond L. Flynn, a strong supporter of the Fire Department who was well-liked by firefighters. Flynn's brother Dennis is a firefighter and the mayor had a brother-in-law on the department.

During Flynn's tenure as mayor from 1984-1993, the Fire Department was able to restore jobs cut during the term of former Mayor Kevin H. White and purchase millions of dollars in fire trucks to replace an aging fleet. The firefighters' union, Local 718 of the International Association of Firefighters, negotiated generous raises and benefits with the Flynn Administration.

Menino, however, was initially slow to reach a contract agreement with the firefighters after he was elected in 1993. The next year, at a brunch with supporters in Charlestown, about 200 firefighters heckled the mayor when he pulled up in his car. A month earlier, an estimated 650 firefighters demonstrated outside a Menino fund-raiser at the Copley Plaza Hotel.

Later that year, Menino and the firefighters agreed on a new contract that provided a 15 percent raise over three years. Since that time, relations between the firefighters and Menino have warmed, to the point where in 1996 and 1997 the union contributed \$1,000 to the mayor's campaign.

Critics of Fire Department spending say the mayor has kept the department and union at a comfortable distance since he was first elected, unwilling to force the department to act on recommendations made in critical audits and management reviews.

Menino said he would like to see more changes, but cautioned that significant improvements take time. "Making changes sometimes takes longer than you would think," he said. "You're changing a whole tradition of service." But he accepted some of the blame that it hasn't occurred faster, saying "I should have put more time and emphasis on it."

Samuel Tyler, the director of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, said Menino is only the latest in a long line of mayors who have managed the Fire Department with a light touch.

"It's not just this mayor," he said. "It's easier to ignore now because times are good. There is no outcry for change among the public."

Change in Boston is all the more difficult because of unique influences that block tinkering with tradition.

A major obstacle to modernizing the department, many believe, is the unusual relationship between the top managers of the department and the union representing firefighters.

In an arrangement unheard of at other major city fire departments, the top fire official in Boston - Pierce - is a member of the firefighters' union. His top aides and district chiefs are also members.

Boston FinCom's Conley said Pierce is not hesitant to discipline firefighters, but is much more reluctant to tackle issues that impact the union's collective bargaining agreement with the city.

Pierce's father was a legendary figure in the local union, serving as president for seven terms. He is widely credited with helping firefighters win key death and injury benefits.

When the younger Pierce was appointed commissioner by Flynn, aides to the mayor were quoted as saying Flynn consulted only with the union before making the appointment.

Pierce said his membership in the union does not impair his ability to discipline other union members or ask for contract items that the union leadership opposes. He also plans to stay in the union. "I am very proud of the local union," he said. "My father did a lot for the union on all levels."

Critics call street alarms a multimillion dollar waste

The power of the Fire Department, and the lack of political will to challenge it, is highlighted by the hundreds of red fire alarm boxes that dot telephone poles on streets throughout Boston.

The system of boxes, connected by underground wires snaking beneath the city, was the first of its kind in the country when it was constructed in 1854. Pull any fire box in the city and a fire engine will respond. It is remarkable for its simplicity and dependability.

It is also a multimillion dollar waste of money, according to the two reviews of the Fire Department's operations.

Boston is one of the few large cities in the country that continues to maintain a street alarm box system. The boxes have been removed in Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Dallas.

The advent of 911 systems, which instantly identify the address of a caller, and the proliferation of telephone systems and cellular telephones has rendered street alarms obsolete, according to several experts.

"The boxes don't make much of a difference," said Philadelphia Fire Captain Charles Crowther of the city's decision to remove all boxes in 1989.

In Boston, street alarm boxes are the number-one source of false alarms. In fact, the department receives three false alarms for every genuine call it gets from a street box.

The system is also costly to keep up. A team of 20 civilians maintains the boxes, which have to be reset every time they are pulled. The department estimates it costs \$1.6 million a year to operate the system.

Although they are not firefighters, the employees who tend to the boxes are members of the firefighters' union and receive hazardous-duty pay. Many of the employees are related to firefighters and come from families with generations of service on the department, another factor that makes eliminating the alarm box system unpopular.

Two of the highest-ranking civilians in the fire-alarm office are brothers, Joseph and Charles Clougherty, whose father was a district chief in the department. Their brother was also a firefighter who was killed in the line of duty.

As with the pay of firefighters, salaries earned by the civilians in the fire-alarm office have also increased significantly in the past several years.

One of the construction foremen, Thomas Magoon, earned \$90,846 last year. Charles Clougherty, who is also a foreman, earned \$85,060. Several workers in the unit earned in excess of \$70,000 last year.

Pierce said the boxes are an important added safeguard because they are unaffected by interruptions of phone service or power outages. "They are something the citizens expect and are used to," he said. "It's like a security blanket."

But Fire Departments in cities where boxes were removed say the response to people in need of help has not been hindered.

"The 911 system is very effective," said Hector Torres, battalion chief for the Baltimore Fire Department. "I can't remember any circumstance where someone pointed a finger because we don't have these boxes anymore."

Commissioner has no plans to change his practices

For those frustrated with the current leadership, the commissioner's dog is the foremost symbol of what's wrong.

Firefighters coming in and out of headquarters often see the commissioner's drivers walking the dog. But Pierce said the drivers are not required to care for his dog and do it infrequently. All are dog owners and enjoy spending time with "Bailey," he said.

Critics say that maintaining the force of four drivers at all, in an era when the commissioner responds to fewer than two dozen fires a year, epitomizes waste. Pierce also has a second Fire Department car with untraceable law-enforcement plates that he keeps at his West Roxbury home. He said he uses the car when he has to travel long distances, such as vacationing on Cape Cod.

By comparison, Police Commissioner Paul Evans has two drivers assigned to him. And Evans, according to aides, drives himself on personal errands and trips.

Pierce defends his need for drivers on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis, saying they rush him to the most dangerous fires, and occasionally some other less serious incidents. A driver enables the commissioner to prepare for a fire en route and keep in radio contact with personnel at the scene. When not driving him, Pierce said the drivers help out the public relations office during weekdays and maintain the car.

He said he has no intention of changing the practice.

In the current political climate, observers say it will be difficult to reduce the number of chauffeurs assigned to Pierce and his top aides, as well as eliminate or cut questionable expenditures for fire details, the Marine Unit and Fire Brigade, alarm boxes, unnecessarily high overtime, and other measures critics cite as examples of bureaucratic bloat and inefficiency.

As long as the economy is good and a fire engine comes when called, proposals for reform, even if they result in millions of dollars in savings, are easy to ignore.

"It can be done," said Tyler of the Municipal Research Bureau. "We have seen it around the country where there is a commitment on the part of the mayor to make it happen. There has to be a political will not to look aside."

1: Fires are down, budget is up

Fires in the city

Boston Fire Department budget

PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA.

GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC / DAVID L. SCHUTZ

2: The Long Island brigade

The Boston Fire Department maintains the Fire Brigade on Long Island, staffed 24 hours a day by a crew of firefighters. Last year, the 16 firefighters stationed there responded to 71 calls, four of them actual fires. Long Island has a homeless shelter but no homes or businesses on it.

GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC / DAVID L. SCHUTZ

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, 1. ABOVE AND BEYOND / As one of four chauffeurs assigned to the fire commissioner, firefighter James Sullivan often has time on his hands for duties not covered in his job description, such as caring for the commissioner's dog

and taking Sullivan's mother and sister to a neighborhood health clinic. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / JOHN TLUMACKI

2. A DRIVING FORCE / In addition to taking Boston Fire Commissioner Martin E. Pierce Jr. to fires of three alarms or more, four drivers on constant alert pick him up at his home, shuttle him on personal errands, and take him to out-of-town rinks where he coaches the Maignon High School hockey team. At left, coaching in Stoneham; below left: arriving for an afternoon practice in Cambridge; at right: Pierce is dropped off at work. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / JOHN TLUMACKI

3. DRY SPELL / Assignment to the Marine Unit, which often goes several days without making a single run, is one of the most sought after in the department, with only the most senior firefighters stationed at Burroughs Wharf. At left, two firefighters wait for a call. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JOHN TLUMACKI

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