

Fire union votes to sacrifice day of pay

by [Jim Walsh](#) - Nov. 21, 2008 07:03 AM
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Mesa firefighters are willing to sacrifice at least one day's pay a year to save the city enough money to avoid cutbacks in fire engines.

Members of two shifts of United Mesa Firefighters Association members, along with civilian employees, voted unanimously Thursday night to sacrifice pay, said Bryan Jeffries, the association's president.

One day for firefighters is the equivalent of 24 hours of pay.

"It shows the community's safety always comes first. They are willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to maintain that safety," he said.

The furlough days are part of a union counter-proposal to City Manager Chris Brady's budget reduction plan. Jeffries said it would reduce the number of engines deployed daily from 18 to 15.

Faced with the need for cutting \$62 million from the budget this year and next, Brady proposes replacing the three engines with two-person crews, using pickup trucks or sport utility vehicles that would respond to routine medical calls.

Fully-staffed fire engines would respond to heart attacks, traffic accidents and other life-

threatening medical emergencies, he said. Brady hopes to save more than \$5.7 million in fire cutbacks alone.

But Jeffries calls that plan "unacceptable," saying firefighters would save fewer lives, wasting valuable time while waiting for more assistance to arrive if a patient's condition worsens.

Furloughs alone would save nearly \$1 million, he said. The union's proposal would save as much money as Brady's without sacrificing fire protection or emergency medical response.

"If the members are willing to do that to help the city save the money, I think that's something we should not pass up," said City Council member Scott Somers, a Phoenix firefighter.

Mesa Mayor Scott Smith plans to meet with Jeffries. "I'm anxious to see what they come up with. We'll look at all ideas, maybe come up with a mixture of ideas," he said.

Somers and council member Alex Finter, a retired Mesa firefighter, both acknowledged there are many non-life threatening medical calls where fire departments send too many resources.

The challenge, they say, is separating the basic life support calls from the advanced life support calls when dispatchers often receive incomplete or inaccurate information from callers.

"There was a fatal fire in Mesa where the call came in as injured person and ended up being a

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structure fire," Somers said.

But Finter remembers attending a training session 20 years ago with since-retired Phoenix Fire Chief Alan Brunacini where he compared emergency medical services to delivering pizza in a concrete mixer.

Both Finter and Somers said Mesa should expand its 1½ year experiment with Transitional Response Vehicles, in which a paramedic and an emergency medical technician responded to non-emergency calls. A physician's assistant teamed with a firefighter during flu season.

Chief Harry Beck has said about 70 percent of the 55,000 fire calls every year are medical-related, and 60 percent of those are non-life threatening.

Deputy Chief Mike Dunn, a fire department spokesman, said the TRV experiment was a success, freeing up four-man units for true emergencies and improving response times. But because the program was staffed with firefighters paid overtime, it was discontinued in the last few weeks and TRV units are used only sporadically when there is enough manpower, he said.

"We already have a tool in place. We should build on that, rather than experiment with an old response model," Finter said.

Finter said he hopes to work out a compromise between Brady and firefighters.

Somers also favors expanding use of TRV units

but is reluctant to take fire engines off the streets.

"Efficiency is not always the right response. Sometimes, effectiveness is what you need," Somers said. "Our mission as firefighters and paramedics is to be effective in saving lives and property."

He said any mistakes would come from sending too little manpower on calls, not too much, and the cost would be in lives lost rather than money saved.

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