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A Conversation With . . .

Firefighters Local 372 President Rich Brandt



Rich Brandt, a captain with the Long Beach Fire Department, has served as president of Firefighters Local 372 since 2005. He and 10 boardmembers – whose union work is done on their own time – represent some 365 firefighters in the city. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

As time nears for the Long Beach City Council to make a decision on the 2011 fiscal year General Fund budget, it appears likely that as many as 21 firefighter positions may be eliminated: 15 in what the city manager calls Plan A [three of whom are tied to Prop H oil funds] in attacking a portion of the \$18.5 million deficit; and 6 in Plan B, that kicks in if the city's unions don't forgo contracted pay raises and benefits.

Currently, firefighter staffing up through battalion chief numbers roughly 376 – far below the 419 firefighters necessary to reach one hundred percent staffing. Come October 1, it may be as low as 355.

“That puts us at risk,” claims Rich Brandt, president of Firefighters Local 372. He says numbers don't always tell the story; it comes down to response times and the ability of the firefighters to keep citizens safe.

Brandt knows about keeping people safe. He has more than 20 years of experience at three fire departments. Born and raised in

New York, he joined that city's fire department in 1988, working at 51st and Lexington Avenue. After several vacations to the West Coast, he decided in 1991 to relocate to Southern California. He joined the City of Westminster Fire Department in 1991, and in November of 1993 was accepted to the Long Beach Fire Department. Along the way he's always been involved with the local union, first as a “house steward” in New York (“There are 230 fire stations in New York . . . we have one representative for each . . . so I did that as a conduit from the big union to each individual fire station.”). In Westminster, he was involved with the union as a way to contribute to the community.

Brandt has served with the Long Beach local for 15 years. He's been president since 2005 and is up for reelection in November. He and the 10-member board are each elected by the membership, with no limit on how many two-year terms they may serve. The board meets twice a month and holds quarterly membership meetings.

Unlike the police officers association which elects a police officer as full-time president, at the firefighters local the presidency is a volunteer position, as are all board positions. Brandt, a captain, holds down a full-time job in the department's fire prevention bureau and conducts union matters on his own time. The only union paid staff is a part-time assistant.

As city revenue has decreased the past several years and is expected to remain on the low end for several more years, attention is now focused more than ever on the biggest part of the General Fund pie: the cost of public safety personnel. Once thought of as untouchable, police and fire professionals are being cut in nearly every city in the country. So far, most reductions in Long Beach have been handled without layoffs. That changes with the fiscal year beginning October 1 when firefighters and police officers now on the job will be laid off.

How many firefighters and police officers do we need to service Long Beach, what level of service do we want and how much do we want to pay – or what can we afford to pay? What are our priorities?

Those decisions are to be made in the next couple of weeks by the nine members of the Long Beach City Council. Theirs are the only votes that count. Citizens can and should weigh in on those decisions.

As union head, Brandt was asked to weigh in with the Business Journal. He sat down with Publisher George Economides and Staff Writer Tiffany Rider on August 20. He was joined by Rex Pritchard, a vice president of Local 372.

– George Economides

LBBJ: Is there one major difference that jumps out at you between serving in New York and serving in Long Beach?

Brandt: Call-volume-wise, my station in New York ran 4,500 runs a year. We have stations here that have 4,500 runs as well. The difference is . . . They do about 30 percent medical and 70 percent fires, and we do about 80 percent medical and 20 percent fires.

LBBJ: Let's talk about the union. It's Local 372. What does that represent? Is that just a number?

Brandt: We are part of the International Association of Firefighters. That's 200,000-plus firefighters from across the country. . . . We were one of the first locals to be chartered across the country.

LBBJ: Two years after joining Long Beach, you got on the union board. That's pretty fast.

Brandt: My dad was a Teamster for 40 years. It's kind of in my blood. What I did is . . . the type of person I am is, I just want to try and contribute as much as I can. I sought the union because of the goodwill stuff we do and all of the community services that we do. I felt that I could help.

LBBJ: What's the purpose of Local 372? Why does it exist?

Brandt: Wages, hours and working conditions.

LBBJ: So you represent them for contract negotiations . . .

Brandt: Contract negotiations, working conditions, safety conditions, equipment, the hours that we work . . . Up through the rank of battalion chief.

Pritchard: We also consider it a huge family. That means that we look out for each other within the community. We do tons of barbecues, I'm sure you well know, but it goes beyond that. . . . for example, the tot lot down by Naples, they needed help planting trees. What happened? Under the leadership of the Local, we turn to our membership and say, "Hey, we need some guys." We

had 35 people down there planting trees. We have people who volunteer their time to go into the children's ward at Memorial to visit kids at Christmas and go trick-or-treating in there to help them out, so . . . When people think union, they think, "Oh, it's this." That is the case with some, but within this Local 372, we are very community based. We help retirees, too.

Brandt: We did over 100 community barbecues last year; non-political community barbecues. We do it on our days off and we do it with our own money. The guys doing the barbecues are all off-duty, all on their own time.

LBBJ: What about if a firefighter has a problem? Do they come to you as president? It could be family problems, it could be work problems, if there's a criminal issue or whatever . . .

Brandt: We have a very good, unique system. My three vice presidents [on the board] handle all of our grievances, so if someone has an issue that they are concerned with, they usually contact one of the vice presidents and they'll handle that situation. I'll get involved later if I have to, but they do a very good job at that. My treasurer handles all of our finances; he's our PAC chairman. One of my vice presidents handles our workers' comp issues along with grievances. Another one also handles legislative and communication issues. My other vice president handles PERS [public employee retirement system] issues. Everybody has a responsibility, and then under each one of the vice presidents are two directors. So if I or the board tasks us with something, then the workload can distributed.

LBBJ: When there are contract negotiation with the city, how does that process work?

Brandt: Normally, I would be the chair of the negotiating team, then maybe distribute the work. So there would be about five of us on the negotiating team.

LBBJ: Non-boardmembers too?

Brandt: We have. Last time we had . . . we try to represent each rank and their interest, because they're different. So, normally, it would be chaired by myself and have one or two vice presidents, and maybe a couple of directors and then some input from the floor. The first thing we do is solicit to our members: "What would you like to see? What's missing? What do you need? What would you like?" We get input from them as to: "Do you want higher wages? Do you want more time off? Do you want this? Do you want that?"

LBBJ: So the process is that your task force makes a recommendation, then the full board votes on it and then it goes to the membership for a vote?

Brandt: Correct.

LBBJ: Has the membership ever voted against the recommendation of the board?

Brandt: Not as long as I've been president, but before [me], yes.

LBBJ: So it is completely transparent, there's no . . .

Brandt: Right. What we do is, we get our team and we negotiate back and forth and we come up with something that's reasonable. The entire board will look at it, we'll dissect it and then we'll present it to the membership. . . . We'll visit each fire station to try and talk to the guys and say, "Do you have any questions or concerns?" We get a lot of correspondence through our Web site; guys that have questions and all of that, so we take that into consideration. We'll call a couple of general membership meetings. We'll present all of the information with time for questions and



Rich Brandt, president of the Long Beach Firefighters Local 372, is seen here with some of the firefighters at the fire training center at Station 17. On truck, from left are: Bob Cheng, Kristoph Wattson and Brad Liebeck. Front row, from left: James Whiteside, Mick Hannan, Brian Mauga and Brandt. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

answers, and then we'll have either a vote at a membership meeting or we'll do a Web vote.

LBBJ: Let's get back to staffing so readers have a better idea of how things work. How many firefighters does Local 372 represent?

Brandt: At full strength, we represent 419 members.

LBBJ: What do you have now?

Brandt: We're 43 positions short.

LBBJ: So there are 376 firefighters that you currently represent?

Brandt: Correct.

LBBJ: What's the size of the total force, the department?

Brandt: We have two assistant chiefs, three deputy chiefs and a fire chief.

LBBJ: So 382. How many women?

Brandt: A dozen.

LBBJ: And they're firefighters . . .

Brandt: They can be firefighters, firefighter paramedics, engineers . . .

LBBJ: How many of your personnel are paramedics? Don't you have to have special training to be a paramedic?

Brandt: Yes. We have 84 paramedics.

LBBJ: How many stations are there?

Brandt: We have 23 stations. We have 19 engines, three ladder trucks, two light forces, nine paramedic [rescue ambulances] . . .

LBBJ: Explain light force.

Brandt: That's a hybrid system because we cut positions last year [consists of a truck and engine staffed with six people]. Nine BLS [basic life support ambulance] units, two fire boats, three airport units, one USRT [urban search and rescue task force] unit, one hazardous materials task force unit, six lifeguard rescue boats, seven beach vehicles and one dive boat.

LBBJ: Is 84 a minimum requirement for paramedic firefighters in the department, or is there a minimum requirement?

Brandt: Yes. We have to have enough to staff the nine rescues [paramedic rescue ambulances], plus our 10 assessment engines [paramedic assessment companies].

LBBJ: So you have to be a firefighter paramedic to use those vehicles?

Brandt: The rescues? Yes. Anytime you see a rescue it's going to have two paramedics on it. That's L.A. County protocol, two paramedics. But we have three paramedics assigned. There are two on the rescue and there's one on an engine.

What we try and do is, we try to get a paramedic on scene for all of our calls immediately. So we have paramedic engines. That's because we only have nine paramedic rescues, and we have a very big city to cover. So, in actuality, we should probably have 16 paramedic rescues, but because of money we don't, we have nine. We need additional paramedics, so instead of on an engine with four people, we have the engineer who drives, the captain in charge, a firefighter and a paramedic. That's called a paramedic assessment engine. We may get an engine on scene first, so there's a paramedic who can do an initial assessment, as a rescue from a different part of the city is coming over to basically end up transporting that patient.

Pritchard: An important distinction between that – it's called a paramedic assessment engine because that paramedic cannot do everything that the paramedics in the rescues can do. L.A. County won't allow them; you have to have two together.

Brandt: You can do an assessment, but . . . You've got to wait for the other paramedic to get on scene per the protocol so that they can do a full workup of everything and then transport the patient.

LBBJ: Many people have asked, if it's a health related call, why do you also send a fire truck out?

Brandt: We have a very efficient system in Long Beach. It's called a tier dispatch system. All of our dispatchers are emergency medical [dispatchers]. When a call comes in, they'll dispatch the correct units. So if someone calls up and says, "I'm having a heart attack," they go through the [system] and as they're talking to the patient, they've already dispatched the closest engine and [paramedic] rescue. The reason we send an engine and a rescue is that person may have gotten hit in the chest because

somebody punched him. He's not really having a heart problem, he's having a somebody-punched-him problem. So we get there and we say, "What's wrong?" They say, "Oh, I have shoulder pain." We say, "It came in as a heart attack." They say, "No, no. I just have shoulder pain." Then the captain will get on the radio and cancel the [paramedic] rescue because we can handle it.

LBBJ: So is the engine team always there first, or most of the time?

Brandt: Most of the time the engine gets there first. Because we have more engines and we only have nine paramedic units. So because our city is so big, we send an engine and a rescue but the engine gets there first so if they get there and you're having a heart attack, when rescue comes in, we're already working the patient up.

LBBJ: So over a period of time, you're actually saving time by having the engine there because you probably get a certain percentage of calls that don't need a paramedic rescue unit.

Brandt: Right. We have a tier dispatch; an Alpha response, which is just an engine, so if someone says they have a headache they can send an engine. The next one is a Bravo response. A Bravo response is an engine and a transport ambulance. And a Charlie response is an engine and a paramedic rescue.

LBBJ: What do you have the most of?

Brandt: Well, it's close between Bravos and Charlies. A lot of the Charlies get downgraded, though. A lot of people know the right things to say on the phone, too.

LBBJ: It's good to know this. A lot of people don't understand how it all works.

Brandt: So what happens is, let's just say a call comes in and you say, "I have a headache." We say, "OK, we'll send a truck."

You know what, though, 39,721 people called for some type of a [medical] problem [during 2009, which was the highest number of the decade; in 2000 it was 34,857 calls]. You wouldn't believe the stuff they would go on [about], but that's just the way the system works. They say doctors don't make house calls. That's true – firefighters make house calls.

LBBJ: So it's a good system that benefits the public . . .

Brandt: Again, it could come in as a headache, we get there in the engine, we look at the guy and holy smokes he's sweating profusely. You check his blood pressure and it's 250/80. That's a hypertensive crisis. Guess what? I'm going to get on the radio because I need to be rescued [paramedic unit]. It ends up going from an Alpha to a Charlie or back to a Bravo. So that is why we dispatch as we do.

LBBJ: So what you're saying in essence is you'd rather be on the side of caution than find out you're getting to a scene and you're not prepared? You're pretty much prepared for the worst situation.

Pritchard: What I would say though is when an engine gets on scene . . . the problem is one of your employees could say they have a headache and you would say, "whatever," because most citizens don't have a clue about medical issues. So they would say, "I really feel bad, could you please call 9-1-1?," and by the way it's described on the phone, we respond on that tier dispatching; we as the experts are going to come. People don't understand what's going on with their bodies, and we're trained to do that. So when it goes back to "Why are all these people here?" Well, all of these people are here because there is some type of crisis going on. It's something that we understand but that's hard for the citizens to understand.

LBBJ: When you send a paramedic unit and an engine unit to a call, does that count as two calls?

Brandt: One call.

LBBJ: So is every incident considered a call?

Brandt: Yes.

LBBJ: So if you have a big event such as the Galaxy Towers fire . . .

Brandt: One call.

LBBJ: So it's one call no matter how many engines or firefighters are responding?

Brandt: We'd have one incident number for that. That's it.

LBBJ: Did I hear that 80 percent of the calls are non-fire?

Brandt: Yes, 80 to 85 percent.

Pritchard: They tend to be medical or other issues.

LBBJ: Is that typical in similar-sized cities?

Brandt: Yes.

LBBJ: Also, can you explain the work schedule for our readers. What's a typical month like?

Brandt: We work a four-four-six schedule. So four days "on" every other day, then four days off, then four days "on" every other day and then six days off.

LBBJ: So in a month . . .

Brandt: In a month we generally work 10 to 12 24-hour shifts because it varies. One month it might be nine, the next it might be 12.

LBBJ: This is across the city, right? There's no variation?

Brandt: It's across the city. So we work an average of 56 hours a week.

LBBJ: Aren't some of those 56 hours at time-and-a-half?

Brandt: Three hours.

LBBJ: Is this work schedule typical in similar cities our size?

Brandt: Yes, everybody in California works 24-hour shifts. Some of them work 48-hour shifts.

LBBJ: But it's not like Long Beach is doing it's own thing, right?

Brandt: Right. It's a standard practice.

LBBJ: Do firefighters typically work at the same station or do they rotate?

Brandt: They're typically at that station during "on" shifts.

LBBJ: So you work Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Then you're off Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and come back to work Friday, Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, then take off Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Then it starts over.

Brandt: Yes.

Pritchard: So I'm going to show up at work on Monday at 8 a.m. I'm not going to go home until Tuesday at 8 a.m.

LBBJ: Who developed this? Is there like the "father of the work schedule?"

Brandt: Quite honestly . . . We would need 100 more firefighters on payroll to change this to 12-hour shifts or 10-hour shifts . . . They developed this many moons ago – 30 years ago – because of efficiency. Some people say, "Well, there's sleep in there." You know what I say? I haven't slept in 20 years. I've rested. The next day, when I get home, I sleep for six hours because I've got my butt kicked the night before. With some stations it varies. . . . But at typical stations like where Rex [Pritchard] works, which is on Walnut and Peterson, they're running 16-calls a shift. It's not an excuse. It's not just like, "Let's work until midnight and then go



The Long Beach Fire Department has 23 fire stations. In fiscal year 2009, the department handled 39,721 medical calls for service, the most in the past 10 years. Conversely, fire responses were the lowest in the past decade, numbering 4,884 in 2009. The 2010 fiscal year ends September 30. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

home and hope there's not a call." You can't hope there's not a call.

LBBJ: Let's get into the budget. The mayor has stated to you publicly on several occasions, "We know you guys gave. We appreciated that." What was he referring to?

Brandt: Two years ago we gave back \$750,000.

LBBJ: When you say gave \$750,000, you mean . . .

Brandt: Cash. Each one of my guys gave back more than \$2,000.

LBBJ: The 376 firefighters?

Brandt: Yes, the firefighters contributed back . . . They gave back \$2,000 each out of their pockets that paid the \$750,000 deficit that we were obligated for.

LBBJ: When you guys say 'gave back,' you don't mean you wrote a check?

Brandt: We wrote a check.

LBBJ: You did?

Brandt: Yes, we did. We gave them \$750,000 in hard cash.

LBBJ: Why did you do this?

Brandt: We wanted to help out the city. One thing about firefighters is, we give. We thought it was the right thing to do and we wanted to make sure that the city remained solvent, so I went to the members, we talked about it and we decided to contribute.

LBBJ: Where did the \$750,000 figure come from?

Brandt: It was the amount that, when they had the deficit at the time, they said this is how much we would owe. And I said, "OK, how much do you want us to give?" They asked for 2 percent or whatever it was. I said, "How much is that?" They said it was \$750,000. So I said, "OK, I'll get you \$750,000."

LBBJ: So this wasn't like getting a pay raise and then giving it back?

Brandt: No.

LBBJ: What kind of contract are you under right now?

Brandt: It's a five-year contract.

LBBJ: And it was signed when?

Brandt: In 2008. We just got it then gave money right back.

LBBJ: That's what I was trying to get to. So in 2008 you signed a contract that called for what kind of raises over the five years?

Pritchard: It's complicated, but the long and short of it, it was progressive. The city recognized of our 10 survey cities [used for comparison purposes] that we were at the bottom and we've been on the bottom for years. So we prepared a total compensation package so we could take into account everything. It was fair to both sides and the goal was to get us over the length of that five years – gradually, so it doesn't hit the city all at once – get us up to median of our 10 comparable cities. Within that there are variables on how we get there, but it's pretty complicated. The long and short of it is it was a gradual progression to get us to just median when we've been just sitting at the very bottom.

LBBJ: So that started in 2008? I didn't hear you give a percentage.

Brandt: In January 2008 we were to get 1 percent. And in April 2008 we were to get 2 percent.

LBBJ: Did those happen or not?

Brandt: Those did happen, and then on top of that we gave back . . .

LBBJ: The \$2,000 [per person]?

Brandt: The \$750,000. Yes.

LBBJ: That was the 2008-09 fiscal year?

Brandt: Yes. It was 2008-09.

LBBJ: So you gave back what you got in April?

Brandt: Pretty much.

LBBJ: OK. Then we have the current fiscal year that we're in.

Brandt: So then in 2009, when they were developing the 2009-10 budget, which is the one we're in, we would do [the five-year contract called for] general salary increases averaging about 2.7 to 3 percent. On October 1, 2009, we were due that increase.

LBBJ: So that's for the current fiscal year. So October 1 of last year for the current fiscal year of 2009-10 you got an average salary increase of 3 percent?

Brandt: No, we didn't get it. We were due that amount. What we did was we didn't take it. We deferred everything a year.

LBBJ: To October 1 of this year?

Brandt: Right. So due to the economic situation, the firefight-

ers agreed to defer the October 1, 2009, general salary adjustments to October 1, 2010, and . . .

LBBJ: The city still can't afford it.

Brandt: So we just moved the entire contract, so we eliminated 2009 and moved it.

LBBJ: So what is the city asking from you this year? Is it asking you to forgive that increase on October 1 or to keep it?

Brandt: They're asking us for \$2,473,433.

LBBJ: Is that from the department or from the employees?

Brandt: That is from the employees, from the firefighters.

LBBJ: So they want you to give back almost \$2.5 million.

Brandt: Actually \$2.7 million it is.

LBBJ: \$2.7 million for October 1, 2010; so does that mean they want you to forego your raise again?

Brandt: Correct, plus a little extra. . . . What they want us to do is squeeze everything, which would be our general salary increases that we were due last year and this year. They want us to forego those, plus any additional step increases.

LBBJ: Where does that put you in comparison to the 10 cities?

Brandt: We're still at the bottom.

LBBJ: Have the other cities' fire departments given back?

Pritchard: I would say probably a majority of them have.

LBBJ: You have not, as a union, voted on what the city is asking of you to do October 1 of this year, correct?

Brandt: We're working on it right now.

LBBJ: So you could come back with an alternative to the . . . it's called bargaining I guess, right?

Brandt: Right.

LBBJ: So now you have to go to your members and say whatever you're going to say and hope they go along with it.

Brandt: The hard part is that we went away from traditional bargaining and went to this interest-based bargaining that the city wanted us to do with a third party. We came up with a very good package. It's all data-driven; there's no light fluff like, "You should just give us 5 percent because we're good guys." This was all data-driven and all of our data is here in our contract, everything on our total compensation . . . So the package we put together was based on the cities that are comparable to us. We ran the numbers, the city ran the numbers, we actually had our numbers guy and their numbers guy work together on the numbers so everything is completely documented.

It was a very fairly bargained contract. So now after that we felt good and the city felt good. We had a very good fact-driven, number-based contract. But, after that, of course, the world fell apart, so that's why the firefighters have come to the table each year. We understand the situation, but we still stand by our collectively bargained contract.

LBBJ: What was the mood of the firefighters a year ago when you recommended that they give up their 3 percent?

Pritchard: What I would say to that is it depends on your time in the city. Our senior members, they look back over the city and how it's been in a deficit for the last 13 years. So what's happened is those members come to us and when we sit in a general membership meeting explaining to them why we think we need to do this giveback, they say, 'Hey, look, we've been giving back little by little for the last decade. We have lost staffing, we have lost pay, we have lost numerous things over this decade,' and they sit there and replay things. We get a new mayor, new councilmem-

bers every four to eight years and so, to them, it's like, 'When is it ever going to end?'

LBBJ: You negotiated the new contract in 2008, but the city knew before 2008 that we were heading into a recession. Do you feel the city was totally above board in its negotiations? It seems the city would know that times would be getting more difficult.

Pritchard: I think that would be a question for them to answer.

LBBJ: What's your best guess of what's going to happen in the next month?

Brandt: Well, here's the situation: our Plan A cuts are going to happen. . . . So we're going to lose another 15 positions, which is basically closing another engine company.

LBBJ: Now these 15 positions, we're not talking about layoffs. Do you mean through attrition or what?

Pritchard: Let me clarify. It's not through attrition. We're so short right now, on October 1, 15 spots are gone. It's not going to be gradual.

Brandt: Last year, on top of pushing our contract back a year, we also lost 12 positions.

LBBJ: Who came up with the numbers for Plan A? I assume the city manager went to the fire chief and said, 'Give me this.'

Brandt: To give him \$1.6 million.

LBBJ: So the fire department recommended these numbers under Plan A?

Brandt: The fire chief recommended what would be the minimal impact to the citizens.

LBBJ: Did he communicate with you before he did that?

Brandt: Yes. We talked about this.

LBBJ: And you guys said?

Brandt: We said, "Well, we understand you have to submit cuts. If these went through, these would have the least impact on the safety of the citizens and the safety of the firefighters. We're not happy with them."

LBBJ: What happens if your people say, "No, we're not going to give back the 3 percent?" Then does Plan B go into effect?

Brandt: Yes, Plan B goes into effect.

LBBJ: What does Plan B do to you?

Brandt: Plan B is an additional engine company.

LBBJ: So you would end up losing two and a half this year after losing one last year?

Brandt: Correct.

LBBJ: Does that put us at risk?

Brandt: That puts us at risk. . . . That would have a major impact on our delivery system.

Pritchard: It would have a devastating effect on it.

LBBJ: Back in 2004 there was a study done . . .

Brandt: Yes, the Tri-data.

LBBJ: Yes, the Tri-data, and it had a lot of recommendations – 126. I have them here. Did you guys accept this study?

Brandt: I think both fire management and the union accepted some of the proposals and have implemented some of them. Some of them were just outlandish.

LBBJ: What about this one: consider moving to a 24-hour on-duty 48-hour off-duty schedule as a way to reduce overtime liability? Obviously you've been here long enough; you weren't the president at the time but you were on the board when this study was done. Did the board take a look at these recommendations?

Brandt: Yes. One on, two off is what New York does. We

Fire Department Calls For Service – 10-Year Comparison

Responses	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Fire	5,335	5,590	5,653	5,434	5,504	5,476	5,204	5,011	4,991	4,884
Medical	34,857	35,471	35,956	37,602	36,482	37,489	37,651	38,677	38,842	39,721
Non-Fire	3,288	3,314	3,120	3,084	3,059	2,840	3,158	3,092	3,124	2,770
Haz Mat	916	1,000	982	1,004	903	814	819	746	694	616
Sub Total	44,396	45,375	45,711	47,124	45,948	46,619	46,832	47,526	47,651	47,991
Lifeguard/ Marine Safety	9,235	8,372	8,425	9,795	10,909	10,033	10,573	9,596	10,089	13,965
Total	53,631	53,747	54,136	56,919	56,857	56,652	57,405	57,122	57,740	61,956
Number of Employees*	495	498	472	447	446	431	429	428	439	438

*Sworn fire personnel; does not include lifeguards. The Fiscal Year 2010 number of sworn personnel is 424. Statistics are presented by fiscal year, running October 1 through September 30. Source: Long Beach Fire Department and Long Beach Firefighters Local 372.

looked at our schedules as far as one on, one off. We looked at all the studies done on sleep deprivation and everything else, and there's no risk to our firefighters to switch to this, to what they were talking about. But you won't get those revenue savings. It doesn't make any sense where they got those numbers. Some cities have gone to a 48-hour on, 96-hour off. The people who did this, they've done a number of these around the country, and the problem is why aren't we compared to Albuquerque? It doesn't make sense here in California where it would in New York, right? In New York we do nine and 15-hour shifts.

LBBJ: So every city is different. Every city's needs for fire service are different. Every city's financial situation is different, even though there are obviously some good comparisons. The argument has always been that we, as a city, if we've only got so much money, that's all we can afford to pay. Firefighters have given back the last several years and passed on pay raises. You may have to do it again. Are you convinced the current staffing system, the four, four, six and all the other things involved in providing the service here, is the best system possible? Or do you have options you can look at to see if there's a way to tweak it to make it less expensive? I know your number one goal is to make sure the level of service remains high.

Brandt: We went to the light force. We think it's very inefficient, but it reduced our staffing without putting our members at risk. It's very inefficient because now we have an extra unit on scene. We understand the Plan A cuts and probably, again, we're not going to be as efficient as we currently are, but at least not put us at a dangerous level. Beyond that, though, we're basically done.

LBBJ: You're at the bare bones right now?

Brandt: We are at the bare bones. We can't cut any more staff. We don't have any upper management [six positions]. We hardly have any support staff left. Everybody is doing two or three jobs, but we're managing. We can't cut anymore there. All we're talking about now is staffing. If you look at last year's cuts and you

look at the Plan A's here, beyond that we're getting into a very dangerous level.

Pritchard: Part of the issue is the fact that – and the thing that doesn't get covered – is that ultimately the safety of the citizens is what's coming down. You can talk about numbers, efficiency, over compensation, all these things get talked about. But the long and short of it is the safety of our citizens and our ability to protect them. The station I'm at, and the reason why the firefighters have given is, every time we think about an engine leaving we associate faces to that. . . . We associate people's faces and the families we get to know. So in all honesty, the city does play on us. They say, because we have given back through the years and we live in the community, they play on the sympathies of what we do and how we are. That's the part that gets left out, is that the safety of the people is going to be affected.

LBBJ: Have you made recommendations to the city to look at other areas for cuts, or do you feel that's the role of the city council?

Brandt: I think that the way they have it structured right now, we're looking at our piece of the pie and the recommendations from the city manager and the mayor to say, 'Hey, stay in your piece of the pie. If you can stay in your piece of the pie, then we'll be a solid city. That's what we're looking at.

I'm not going to tell you right now to go ahead and cut 10 libraries and go ahead and do this or do that on somebody else's back. What I'm telling you is, we're willing to look at, as firefighters, our piece of the pie and what our recommended cuts would be.

So I have a choice to make and I have a choice to present to my members: either we can take our contractually-obligated raises, which the city owes us, or suffer the cutbacks in staffing, which are getting dangerously low and puts firefighters and citizens at risk. We have to make that choice. I think ethically and morally we bargained this [contract] in fairness. That's the hard part for us. But I think as firefighters we look at what's going on economically. We understand the situation and we're not willing . . . I don't think my

guys are willing to sell themselves out to put themselves or the citizens at risk. I really don't at the end of the day.

LBBJ: But this is just one year. We're probably looking at three or four more really tough years as far as revenue generation. I mean, city officials overestimated what the revenues were going to be. So we're talking not one year here. What's this going to look like in two years or three years? They can only cut so many positions.

Pritchard: You know, it's an interesting question. I'd love to read in the Journal why our General Fund is the way it is over the last 20 years. We keep looking at this through a small, little window year after year. Well what about the last 13 years?

LBBJ: Do you want to go on the record and say there are other places the city should be looking at to make cuts?

Brandt: You mean as opposed to the fire department?

LBBJ: Yes.

Brandt: What I can tell you on the record is if the city's Plan B cuts go into effect, it is very dangerous for the citizens and for the firefighters. They have to make the choices they want to make, right?

LBBJ: Do you talk to councilmembers? Do councilmembers call you and say, "Rich, we need to get together and talk about this."

Brandt: Yes. They don't want the Plan B cuts to go into effect either.

LBBJ: Do they talk about alternatives?

Brandt: Yes, they talk about alternatives. They talk about what we can do; "What will the firefighters come up with this time?"

LBBJ: When was the last academy class?

Brandt: They cancelled our last two academy classes. I think it was 2007.

LBBJ: And how many did you graduate then?

Brandt: About 16.

LBBJ: Seems small. So there's nothing planned right now . . .

Brandt: There is something planned right now. You're going to get into this because I know you hate overtime. So we talked about overtime, and our overtime budget is up probably \$2.5 million more than it normally would be. That's because we're 43 positions short right now. That is generated not by us but by our inability to have an academy. So the last two years our academy was canceled. We have a bunch of people retire through attrition like we normally do, and we're right on the edge. We have to get some more firefighters. If you want to reduce our overtime costs, we need to hire 40 firefighters. It's plain and simple and it would reduce our overtime costs by \$2.5 million.

LBBJ: Overtime has always been a big issue and it seems, from what we've read in various publications and online, that it's the constant manning requirement in the contract calling for four-man crews that drives overtime. If you went to three-man crews – not the whole city – in whatever stations you decide are the best ones to test it, isn't that an opportunity to reduce some of the overtime and maybe address some of the financial issues? Instead of cutting firefighters or reducing pay, maybe look at some alternatives like having some three-man crews?

Brandt: Okay, I'm going to be crystal clear on this one.

LBBJ: Okay.

Brandt: In the 1990s we said no to three-man crews, and today I will say no. You couldn't pay me enough money to do that. It's dangerously low staffing for this city with these demographics, and I have all the documentation, facts and figures that show a

city our size, the population our size, the diversity our size and the call volume our size, every city we compare with is running four or five or six-person staffing. The Tri-data report says this city should be at four-person staffing. I didn't sell out my brothers and sisters in the 1990s and I'm not going to sell them out now.

The unique part of our system is we are constantly moving our equipment around to fill holes. If there's a big fire downtown, we're moving Station 18 over to the middle of town to cover that area while they're now fighting this fire. You're idea of [Station] 18 only has five calls a shift so we'll just go to three-person staffing – well, at 12:30 p.m. they may be at [Station] 18 but at 2 p.m. they may be at [Station] 10 or a strike team goes out and now they're on the Westside. So, when you say three-man engines over here, that doesn't mean that they're always going to be in that part of town because of the way our system works.

LBBJ: So bottom line is, you're saying from a safety standpoint, it's out of the question. Are firefighters ready, physically, to handle all the overtime?

Brandt: Yes, we have limits . . .

LBBJ: Not everybody can just turnaround and put in overtime.

Brandt: We have limits on the amount of times you can work and that's based on studies that have been done by independent colleges . . .

LBBJ: Because everybody's got their limit.

Brandt: Yes. We have that. On top of that is the supervisor – if I look at you and I think, "You know what? You're not looking right. Go home. I'm going to get someone else in here." We have a lot of checks and balances.

I really want you and everybody to get clear on this. You've got to get this clear in the paper. People say, "Well let's just go to three-man [crews]." You are reducing staffing. It's constant staffing; it's not overtime. It's a difference because it's an efficient system because we have four-person crews. So when you say reduce overtime, it's not like any other department. It's not like you say to this department, "Reduce your overtime budget by \$1 million," and they say, "OK, fine," and they reduced it, right? Because when you do that to us, you say, "Reduce your overtime by \$5 million." Guess what? Now we're going to reduce our staffing and our response to our citizens and the amount of people we put on the streets.

LBBJ: If city revenue continues to decline, in a year or two, are we looking at closing a fire station?

Pritchard: I think, again, that's a question for city management.

LBBJ: Hopefully we've covered all the key points. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't discussed or that you think our readers should know?

Brandt: Our budget has gone up \$4 million in the last 10 years. That is pretty damn efficient, and that's just natural increases. Nothing over the top. So now our percentage has gone from 17 percent of the General Fund to 19 percent. That's it. We're staying right within that range. . . . We're reasonable people. We give back to the community. We care about our safety and the citizens' safety. We want a decent wage for our members and we want them to have a good career and a good retirement; not die five years after they retire. We're stewards of efficiency, and I'll stand by this: we are the most efficient department in the city. ■