

Firefighter Overtime Pay Eats Up Big Chunk Of General Fund Money

One Firefighter Got More Than \$84,000 In 2007

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Perspective & Analysis

As councilmembers ended a weeks-long debate this month over which programs to cut and which to save, and as the debate over the mayor's infrastructure bond intensified, one group of city employees had no concerns about money: firefighters.

They're not only receiving generous salary and benefit packages and have one of the highest starting salaries in the country, they're collectively raking in millions of dollars in overtime pay. In calendar year 2007, overtime costs to taxpayers totaled \$12.3 million, according to city records obtained by the Business Journal.

And that total is going up, budgeted at \$13 million for the fiscal year beginning tomorrow, October 1. Some highlights:

- One firefighter nearly doubled his base salary by earning \$84,481.99 in overtime during 2007.
- The 12 battalion chiefs averaged \$44,849 in overtime, with three of them over \$61,000.
- Fire captains – 92 of them – averaged more than \$34,500 in overtime. One received \$72,290.30, another got \$66,260.24. Eight others received between \$50,000 and \$60,000 in overtime pay.
- Of the approximately 220 firefighter positions, an alarming 44 cashed in \$40,000 or more in overtime pay.

In addition to the overtime pay enjoyed by the fire department family, hefty pay raises were approved by the city council for the new fiscal year: Battalion chiefs received a 13.5 percent increase to \$134,343; fire captains were given a 12.5 percent increase to \$114,715; and fire engineers a 10.1 percent increase to \$92,566.

The city council-endorsed policy that allows such an extravagant overtime package is tied to what is known as "constant manning." It's part of the contract between the city and the firefighters union, and it's been around for quite a while. The contract calls for fire stations to be manned with four firefighters

24/7, which means when a firefighter is ill, on vacation or off for personal reasons, he or she must be replaced. The replacement is on overtime.

Neither the mayor nor councilmembers have been willing to explore alternatives – even during dire financial times that have seen many community programs eliminated or reduced.

Alternatives could include reducing the constant manning requirement in areas which have a low call-for-service, or changing to three, eight-hour shifts. While there may be legitimate reasons why certain alternatives may not be feasible, they and others should be studied. Long Beach firefighters do an A+ job, but so do employees in other city departments who've experienced changes necessitated by dwindling financial resources.

The mayor and councilmembers stated earlier this year when they faced a \$16 million-plus deficit that "there are no sacred cows." Apparently there is one: firefighter overtime.

Signal Hill Saving Money On Fire Service

Five years ago, Signal Hill's elected officials and management staff balked when Long Beach officials wanted to increase the contract for fire services by \$330,000 for one year. Signal Hill had been contracting-out with Long Beach for fire services for years, but Long Beach needed more money to cover the cost of pay raises.

When Signal Hill officials asked for a detailed cost break down and a long-term contract with guaranteed rates, Long Beach said no, so Signal Hill turned down Long Beach and contracted for fire service with Los Angeles County for the station located at 2300 E. 27th St. Signal Hill management estimates its residents have saved at least \$2 million over the past five years by going with the county, while "receiving the same high level of service" provided by Long Beach firefighters.

Long Beach also lost an undetermined amount of revenue it was receiving for doing fire plan checks for Signal Hill businesses and developments, and for the city's tank inspection program and other activities that required inspections. ■