



The Huntsville Times

City Council OKs pay hike for firefighters

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320 to be affected; plan estimated to cost \$800,000

Huntsville firefighters, who recently took on additional duties as first responders in medical emergencies, will soon get paid more for their work.

The City Council approved a salary reclassification plan Thursday night that will bump pay for many positions from 4.5 percent to 8 percent, depending on the job.

The increase will be reflected in the Oct. 22 pay period, according to City Finance Director Randy Taylor. Officials say the adjustment will affect 320 fire suppression personnel and tack on an additional \$800,000 cost to the city.

City Public Safety Director Rex Reynolds said Friday the pay reclassification moves Huntsville's entry-level fire salaries from 15th to fifth in a 20-city survey of fire departments throughout the region. Huntsville's new starting pay of \$34,256 compares to \$30,264 previously. Pelham pays the highest at \$47,014, followed by Hoover (\$45,843), Memphis and Tuscaloosa. Madison ranks 10th with a starting pay of \$32,884. Knoxville ranked last at \$26,250.

Reynolds said the higher starting pay should make the Huntsville Fire & Rescue Department more competitive in luring new recruits. Lagging salaries have resulted in a sharp decline in job applicants, Reynolds said, from 650 in 2000 to 229 this year.

The pay bump comes on top of a 3 percent cost of living allowance granted city employees in the budget year that began Oct. 1, along with merit raises for eligible workers. Enhanced education and training requirements also justified the higher pay, Reynolds said.

"We are adding new equipment, new technology and new facilities to respond to the growing demand being placed on our 141 emergency medical technicians, as well as our 161 first responders," Reynolds said. "Our personnel are doing an outstanding job responding to medical emergencies. Calls have been increasing because of annexation, growing neighborhoods and additional people moving here for BRAC."

Huntsville Fire & Rescue began responding to medical emergencies citywide two years ago. Since Oct. 1, 2005, when the priority medical response went into effect, fire and rescue officials have responded to 38,107 medical emergencies.

First response was previously handled by the city's ambulance service, Huntsville Emergency Medical Services Inc. HEMS still responds to take over medical care and transport victims to hospitals.

City officials say medically trained fire and rescue crews can respond quicker from fire stations scattered throughout the city. Huntsville Fire Chief Danny Loggins said dozens of heart attack victims are alive today because of successful field resuscitation by quick arriving fire and rescue units.

The department also responded to 10,600 fire calls during that two-year period.

A similar pay reclassification was done for many positions in the Huntsville Police Department in spring 2005, placing entry-level police salaries fourth in the state and fifth in the region, Reynolds said.

During debate on the pay reclassification, Councilman Bill Kling attempted to make the pay hike retroactive to the beginning of the fiscal year. Administration officials warned that would pose legal problems and set a precedent for future mid-year pay reclassifications.

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