

22-1240 – Request to approve the firefighter 2023 to 2025 contract

Transcript of Discussion

Human Resources and Information Technology Committee Meeting

10/12/2022 at 6:30PM

Aldersperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 00:44

We have no public hearings or appearances so we'll move into our action items. The first of which is 22-1240. Request to approve the firefighter 2023 to 2025 contract. Chief, do you want to speak to that? Or Director Ratchman?

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 01:06

If it's okay, I will and then Chief will have some things to share as well.

Aldersperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 01:09

All right, thank you.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 01:10

So, before I actually get into the tentative agreement, I just first want to call out a thank you to the chief as well as our union board. As you can imagine, negotiations bring out a lot of emotion. You're talking about wages, benefits, working conditions. We had several long sessions of discussions. What's in front of you is a far cry from where all parties started. Everyone was professional, and we left with a handshake. And I think that says a lot about the leadership, and all parties.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 01:44

So having said that, what I'd like to do is go through the tentative agreement, I won't go through every item. But certainly, if I skip through something that you want to talk about, let me know. But there's a few highlights that I think are really important that we do cover in this meeting.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 01:59

So, as I flip forward the first one, I wanted to really kind of call out is on page 2 which is article 17 on promotions. So, in the past promotions at the fire department all the way up to captain had been based on minimally qualified senior employees. So basically, if they had minimum qualifications the person who got the job had--was the person who had most seniority. The change to the contract is to bring in a side letter that we tried since the last contract, which is to allow the chief to promote best qualified. Seniority is no longer part of the equation. This is a real culture shift for the Fire Department, a very traditional department. It's also a really good tool for the chief because he's able to look at the big picture of what's going on, what skills someone has, what they bring to the table and then make that promotion decision.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 02:57

The second item that I wanted to call out is longevity pay. So, as we're talking about wages with our employees it always seems to come back to 'what's my hourly rate of pay?' And sometimes what's forgotten is that there's

other compensation that employees are receiving like \$200 for longevity pay. So as part of the concession to bring the bargain together for the union to get the wages that they were looking for to get closer, this would be eliminated from the contract. Dollar-wise, this is about a quarter percent, so this is not a small ticket item.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 03:34

The next item I wanted to call out is article 37 which is Advance Life Support Engine. So, ALS engine. And I'll talk about the money that's associated with this. But this is a new item to the contract. And, Chair, with your permission, I'd like to have the chief talk about the why behind this and why this is important for the future direction of the fire department.

Aldersperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 04:00

Thank you, Chief.

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 04:01

Thank you, Jay. Thank you chair. This ALS engine concept is something that we've been striving for since 2018 when I when I became chief. So, each fire truck is staffed with firefighters, right. But those firefighters have special skills. Some of them are you know tactical paramedics for the SWAT team. Others have training in urban search and rescue and structural collapse. This ALS engine would mean that we would have paramedics staffed on all of our fire trucks. So that is a little different.

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 04:38

Back in 2018. We were considered emergency medical responders or first responders which is the lowest level of pre hospital care. About two years ago we upgraded to EMT basic, which is kind of that intermediate medical level of care. And probably in the next, call it, two years we will be at an ALS engine where we'll have a paramedic on every single fire truck. And why is that important? It is important because, historically, the fire department arrives on medical incidents 80% of the time before the ambulance. And the data that we have--we have kept over the last three years--shows that we're on scene about six to seven minutes before the ambulance gets there. So, in that time, we can provide a higher level of ALS intervention prior to the ambulance arriving, and the ambulance typically will have paramedics on it. So, this will give that that patient that we are working on a better chance of survival.

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 05:40

One of the main reasons paramedics exist is for cardiac events. This is where you have all types of different medications--to start a heart, to slow down a heart, to even stop a heart if you wanted to--want to. And we can give other medications to treat this dysrhythmia that may be affecting that individual. So, this would be a huge leap forward for the fire department. And I'm really proud that we are going down this road. And we'll be there very shortly.

Aldersperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 06:13

Thank you.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 06:15

So, the next item that I'd like to outline is the wages that would be in this contract. So, this contract would be 2023 through 2025. So, in 2023, the union members would get a 2.25% increase on 12/1 of '23. They would get an increase of 1% in 2024 on 7/1 and an additional 2% on 12/1 of 2024 and 2.5% increase on 12/1 of 2025. So that ends up being 7.75% over three years, which on average is about a 2.58% increase annually. So, if you factor in the longevity, that brings it down to about a 2.3 or 2.8% average.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 07:06

When looking at our comparables--so we look at other fire departments, we also look at other union groups. This is right in line what we're seeing with other union groups, I've seen those settlements anywhere from 2 to 3%, with the average being around two and a half percent. The increase for paramedic pay or the ALS engine would be 2.75% over the current firefighter EMT. So those employees who are the paramedic on the fire engine, get the 2.75% Extra. But as the chief said in 2023, he does not anticipate that we will be operating at that level. So, this would likely be 2024 or 2025 before those wages are paid.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 07:52

The only additional item that I would just call out is we spent a fair amount of time both management and the union really going through the contract, making some corrections to some errors, some spacing issues, but also there was language that each time it came up we had to ask ourselves like 'what was the intent behind that?' And so we clarified that language. So, there's really no change. There's really just administrative changes. But there was a fair amount of time spent at that.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 08:21

And then contract had a fair amount of side letters. So, side letters, a lot of times, are put in place to not change the contract but to say "in the meantime, we'll do things differently." Like this will be our hours of work. Some of those side letters have been there for a long time. So, we agree that it's either time to bring some of those side letters into the contract, or to say that they no longer applied. So, we actually brought four side letters into the contract one that had been in place since 2007. So that's good cleanup as well and all parties were in agreement. So having said that, if there's any questions, I'd be happy to answer those.

Aldersperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 08:59

I'd just like to--and this is based on kind of a sidebar, just for the anybody who might be reviewing this. Could I ask Chief Hanson to talk about the vacation policy with regard to the normal work schedule of firefighters?

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 09:18

Yes, absolutely. Thank you, chair. So, when you're looking at article 10, the vacation days, you'll see numbers like three or six or 10 based off of their years of service on the fire department. And, you know, for the layperson, you might go hmm, you've been there for eight years and you only get 10 days of vacation. Well, those are 24-hour shifts. So, if you take one day off, or in our case two days off, you'd be off for 13 days because you have your four days that you're off, your 48-hour shift, and then you have another four days off. So, for 10 days. In essence you can you could have five, two-week vacations.

Alderson Denise Fenton (District 6) 10:06

Thank you. I just thought that was something that was kind of important to clarify to people who might not understand how the fire department work hours work. Thank you. Any questions? Alder Alfheim?

Alderson Kristin Alfheim (District 11) 10:19

I have a question to the chief. It's okay. So, we talked about the paramedic trained officers and are--and we're working towards that. And I know you did a great job in the last meeting helping us understand you have rearranged body counts to make sure we maintain status quo. Is there concern going forward? Or is there a plan in play as these higher trained people hit the street? Are we going to have to adjust something in future budgets? There's, is there a plan for that, or--I just would like to live a little bit of foresight on it?

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 10:48

Yes, thank you. With the add of a battalion chief of EMS, that will give us them the management oversight that we need for that position. And that increase in service level that we will have with paramedics. As far as increased budget items, I could see in the future, when we go down the road of paramedic, there may be a request for additional supplies, because we will have medications and a couple other pieces of equipment that we need. One piece of equipment that we're working on now is cardiac monitors that are about \$60,000 apiece, and we need eight of them. So, we'll be submitting grants to get those over the next couple of years. But other than the cardiac monitors, there won't be there won't be any significant change to the budget.

Alderson Kristin Alfheim (District 11) 11:38

I appreciate that. And I brought it up just so that you have thought that stuff through already. And it's built in and really, again, status quo budget. So, I appreciate you trying to increase the service level and compensate those that are doing it as well as work within the confines of the [undecipherable] budget.

Alderson Denise Fenton (District 6) 11:58

Alder Hartzheim.

Alderson Sheri Hartzheim (District 13) 11:59

Thank you, Chair. Chief Hansen, could you help me understand how the addition of this this new ALS engine changes our relationship or might work differently with our relationship with the current ambulance service?

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 12:22

Excellent question. Thank you. So, we will be working with our partner Gold Cross. This does not affect any of their operations. We are not transporting patients. So, what this will do is allow us to provide more advanced interventions quicker. When Gold Cross arrives to the patient side, we will transfer that patient to Gold Cross and they will do the final transporting to the hospital. So, it should not affect our relationship with Gold Cross.

Alderson Sheri Hartzheim (District 13) 12:56

Okay, thank you.

Alderson Denise Fenton (District 6) 12:58

Any other questions? Alder Thao.

Alderson Maiyoua Thao (District 7) 13:00

Thank you to follow up questions to Alder Hartzheim's on ALS. Do our staff needs to be getting additional training on this?

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 13:16

Yes, in order to move up to the rank or to the level of ALS engines, we will need to have more paramedics. So, our plan is a two-pronged approach. Number one is as we are hiring new firefighters. Those individuals that have paramedic usually rise to the top because paramedic is not an easy educational training program. You know, I've been in school almost my entire life and it's the hardest schooling I've ever done. So, it's a nine month very condensed, very difficult program to pass. So typically, if you are a licensed paramedic, you have a very high intelligent level, and you're very motivated to finish paramedic, so you tend to rise to the surface when you were looking at candidates to hire. So that's the first approach that we're using.

Fire Chief Jeremy Hansen 14:06

The second one was we applied for Assistance for Firefighting Grant. And we were successful with that and receive \$200,000, roughly, to train our current members of our department up to six of them. So, we'll be sending up to six current employees to paramedic school next fall when I believe it's in August when that when that program will start. That grant covers tuition and backfill so that when they are not there for their paramedic program, we'll have to hire overtime and that grant covers that overtime.

Alderson Denise Fenton (District 6) 14:43

Any other questions? Okay. Remind me we do have a motion and a second. Oh. Okay. We have a motion and a second. All those in favor, please signify by saying aye. Five zero. That passes.