

Fresno's budget quandary: What to give the firefighters

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Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — The Fresno Bee

The Fresno City Council on Thursday will debate whether to blow next year's budget out of the water before Mayor Ashley Swearingin has even signed it.

The city firefighters' union says smashing an unjust spending plan is the right thing to do.

The council is slated to act on proposals to end a labor war with the union representing rank-and-file firefighters by imposing conditions on the bargaining unit.

The new terms would generate savings -- often called concessions by city officials, even when they're less than completely voluntary -- of about \$842,000 for the fiscal year beginning July 1 and about \$972,000 for the following fiscal year.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin and City Manager Bruce Rudd said the money is key to balancing the books.

But those terms have upset the firefighters. Nearly 100 of them gathered in front of City Hall on Tuesday morning for what union leaders called an "informational walk." The hand-painted signs and circular walking pattern made it look like an old-fashioned protest.

"To burden the employees year after year with concessions, especially in a recovering economy, is not fair," union president Pete Flores said. "We're just looking for a fair and equitable contract."

Rudd said the administration has tried for months to strike a deal after the old contract expired. He said two proposals emerged from the negotiating room with union management's blessing, only to be rejected by members. The administration's patience has limits, he said.

"We are committed to investing in the fire department," Rudd said. "But we're left with no other options."

The three-year deal before the council includes more employee contributions to their retirement and reduces the city's payment for health care premiums.

There is a 2.5% raise effective July 1, 2016.

The politics are complex.

A divided council last Thursday approved a \$286 million general fund budget for next year that failed to produce a single smile.

Council member amendments added about \$1.8 million in additional spending without identifying a source of extra cash.

Several council members hated a last-minute and apparently successful campaign to derail Fire Chief Kerri Donis' reformed fire-inspection program.

Swearingin's vow to rebuild a general fund reserve decimated by the Great Recession and pay off the remainder of a huge internal debt in a single grand gesture rankles some council members as too much prudence.

And there's a conviction of varying intensity from one end of the council's ideological spectrum to the other that "spend" is no longer a dirty word at City Hall.

These and other factors have combined to create a new sense of crisis -- one of service insolvency rather than the cash-flow kind.

Said the firefighters' Flores: "The city along with labor needs to focus on how we can generate more revenue."

The council vote will speak volumes on several levels.

If a majority of four decides not to impose terms, the firefighters would continue to work under the contract that expired last year. The assumed savings/concessions would disappear for as long as things stay in limbo.

The real headache for the administration begins if five council members decide against imposing terms. That would mean the council has a veto-proof bloc to rethink Swearingin's spending priorities.

If the council votes to impose terms on the firefighters, a clear message will be sent to the union whose contract expires in a year -- the powerful Fresno Police Officers Association.

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