

Bruce Rudd: A fair offer to firefighters

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Bruce Rudd

There is nothing more challenging about the responsibility of public leadership than to say "enough" to people you respect and admire, but that's what the mayor, Fresno City Council and I have had to do during negotiations with Local 753, the firefighters' union.

Listening to the stories about risk and sacrifice from our first responders and their families during the City Council meeting last week reaffirmed what was already a profound and deep appreciation for one of the world's toughest jobs — but it doesn't change the fact that the city can't improve fire protection or other essential services without steps to control the rising cost of employee health care and pensions.

There were recurring themes raised Thursday by union members in attendance: family, sacrifice and serving the community. No one would argue with the fact that the Fresno firefighter family has made significant sacrifices to stay in their chosen profession. No one would question that the grueling nature of their work places considerable stress on their mental and physical health. And no one would overlook that the Fresno Fire Department has made adjustments to respond to our fiscal crisis.

However, there were a number of claims made by the firefighters union that need to be corrected and put into context.

Members of the firefighters' union referenced \$13 million that they've "given up" over the last five years to help the city. Without specifics, that number doesn't compute. What we do know is that since the start of the recession, firefighters have received five pay raises totaling 8% and accepted a 2.5% pay cut in August 2011.

The simple truth is that the average Fresno firefighter saw a 7.5% increase in wages and benefits over the last six years when other city employees and people in the private sector were taking losses to their income or losing jobs. While the union members may not be satisfied, the city is pleased that we were able to give them raises, given the enormity of our debt and the painful reality that many of our other employees faced. Providing a modest increase in pay and benefits to firefighters reflects the city's commitment to public safety.

At Thursday's City Council meeting, union President Pete Flores suggested that, instead of asking employees to pay slightly more toward their health care and pension, the city "identify another funding stream." That statement reflects a lack of understanding of the budget and our financial picture. If it were that easy, city officials would have done it long ago.

We also heard about the need to increase staffing levels. We completely agree. As Mayor Swearingin pointed out in her State of the City address, our firefighters want fewer concessions but our citizens need more firefighters. Increased staffing makes more sense than paying more for lower service levels. Increased staffing improves our Fire Department's service levels while giving our firefighters time to recover from the rigors of their job.

What we didn't hear at the council meeting was acknowledgment of the \$4 million investment in the Fire Department in the mayor's budget, which will provide for 12 additional firefighters, along with new fire trucks, training and equipment. We believe these investments are the first steps toward addressing a number of the fire families' needs, but it can't be achieved without a willingness to share in the rising cost of

their health care and pensions.

Lastly, it was not acknowledged by firefighters at Thursday's meeting that the proposal accepted by the City Council was presented by the firefighters' union leadership. They obviously think it's fair or they wouldn't have made the offer.

The administration, City Council and union leadership are in *agreement* on a new labor contract, and we can put this finger pointing aside if the union membership will approve the deal that their own leaders have developed. We are hopeful that union membership will ratify a new labor agreement, which will help to address the needs of Fresno Fire, as well as the needs of the community that we all proudly serve.

Bruce Rudd is the city manager of Fresno.