

Full-time force would double Hills fire costs

By Joanne Mallatowski
staff writer

Changing the Farmington Hills Fire Department's combination force of full- and part-time firefighters to a full-time department would at least double the proposed 1989-90 \$1.8 million department budget.

"Without an actual study, I would estimate that to provide a full-time department, it would at least double the operation," city manager William Costick said.

Fire department officials believe the recent organized effort to enforce Michigan State Firefighters Union rules prohibiting career fire-

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— Richard Marinucci
fire chief

fighters from working off-hours as paid on-call firefighters, is at least, in part, directed toward combination departments, such as Farmington Hills.

In other communities with full-time fire departments, budgets range from \$3 million to \$8 million

annually, Fire Chief Richard Marinucci said.

"Whether people (residents) could afford it, that's the citizens' decision," Marinucci said.

THE DEPARTMENT'S request to hire an additional full-time firefighter in 1989-90 is unrelated to the

recent resignations or the union's enforcement of its rules, Marinucci said.

In the past, departments such as Farmington Hills, have been criticized by members of full-time departments for use of part-time firefighters. Other departments have maintained that part-time firefighters are not as well trained as those who work at the job 24 hours a day.

But Farmington Hills fire officials have long fought those criticisms. "Our people are going to continue to be attractive to other communities," Marinucci said, referring to the level of training provided for department members.

Farmington Hills firefighters are required, according to the department's adherence to state guidelines, to receive at least 90 hours worth of training before stepping onto a fire truck.

The move in Farmington Hills is to have all personnel at the highest level of competence, whether part-time or full-time, despite the lack of state-mandated training levels.

After recruit training of 90 hours, done in-house by qualified, certified staff members, each recruit must obtain a Firefighter I certificate and complete emergency first aid training within 12 months of joining the department.

FIREFIGHTER I certification gives part-time, on-call personnel, as well as full-time members, 132

hours of training. An additional 132 hours is required to attain the highest certification available, Firefighter II.

In 1988, a total of 16,713 member hours of training were recorded, including fire suppression, monthly station drills, emergency medical training, continuing education, fire prevention and fire investigation, according to the 1988 department annual report.

The resignation of five paid, on-call firefighters from the department isn't expected to have a drastic effect on the department. But Marinucci acknowledges that "you can't replace that experience overnight."

Marinucci said it's difficult to pinpoint the exact cost of training that walked out the door because it depends on the various levels of training the fire completed.

Union gets tough; 5 firemen out

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Firefighter unions and some full-time fire departments have argued that the level of competency drops whenever part-time firefighters are used. Using part-time firefighters prevents the need to hire more, career firefighters, according to the unions. Volunteers or part-time firefighters are not represented by the firefighter unions.

MCCOLL DENIES that Farmington Hills is being singled out as a combination department.

"It is not an attack on volunteers or on any particular department. We have simply been trying to enforce the rules for years. We are just asking firefighters to fall in line."

But a letter from Michigan State Firefighters Union representatives published in the spring 1989 issue of Michigan Professional Fire Fighter magazine says otherwise:

"Firefighters had at one point maintained a live-and-let-live posture with regard to volunteers, part-time, call-back concept of the fire

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— Larry McColl
president, firefighters union

service. However, times have changed whereby we can no longer coexist and yet still exist."

SOME COMPLAINTS are being heard from the ranks of firefighters, despite McColl's claim that he has received only encouragement from union members.

"Isn't it absurd that the union can take them away and the city who hired them and pays their wages has nothing to say about it?" Sue Philip, wife of Farmington Hills part-time firefighter Ralph Philip, wrote in a letter to the Observer.

Ralph Philip is a Southfield full-time firefighter who worked as a paid, on-call firefighter in Farmington Hills. He lives in Farmington. He is one of the five who resigned since April 15.

Marinucci believes that while the union is trying to protect full-time firefighters, the reverse might happen. "Full-time firefighters are actually in a supporting role. If there are fewer paid callbacks to support, there is less of a need for full-time services."

The fire chief expects to begin the

department's annual recruitment drive a couple months earlier this year because of the resignations. But enforcement of union rules hasn't "forced us into any desperate acts," he said.

Marinucci said he will not stop any firefighter, full-time or part-time, who wishes to fight the rules. But he doesn't feel it is incumbent on the department to either hire or not hire someone because he or she works as a firefighter elsewhere. "If someone did apply and works somewhere else, that's their problem," he said.

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