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City, firefighters both deserve better leadership

Jeremy Bush
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The Fort Wayne Fire Department is at a crossroads. Years of staffing shortages, denied injuries, threatened benefits and failed leadership have taken a toll on our firefighters.

Despite these obstacles, firefighters continue to answer the call, meeting ever-rising demands while facing some of the most dangerous emergencies imaginable.

The safety of our city depends on a department with a strong culture, one that is fully staffed, properly trained and well equipped. The decisions made today will determine whether that standard is met or allowed to continually collapse.

Public discussion has recently turned to current contract negotiations with the focus on one benefit, relief time for non-duty related injuries.

Contractual relief time for firefighters has often been represented as “generous.” However, there are factors that must be considered to fully understand the nuances of this benefit.

The national average is seven relief days per firefighter per year. Fort Wayne firefighters average five days per year across all categories: short-term sick, long-term sick, duty-related injuries and nonduty-related injuries.

Although categorized as nonduty-related injuries, most are cumulative, the result of years of heavy gear, repetitive strain, toxic environments, and the physical and mental toll of firefighting.

Despite this, the city does not cover the medical expenses related to these cumulative injuries. Nor are we asking them to.

We are, however, asking to preserve a benefit that provides the recovery time needed for firefighters to return to an inherently dangerous and physically demanding job after suffering these injuries.

Additionally, this non-duty related relief time is vital because of the city's history of denying duty-related injury coverage. Two denials stand out: one involving a firefighter who suffered a cardiac event and died in a house fire before being revived, and another involving a firefighter diagnosed with occupational cancer.

In both cases, the city refuses to recognize these as duty-related injuries/illnesses. We previously took this fight to the Indiana Statehouse, where lawmakers, recognizing injustices, unanimously passed legislation amending Indiana Code 36-8-4-5 in direct response to Fort Wayne's mistreatment of its firefighters.

Relief time is also part of a broader balance.

Fort Wayne's pensionable salary ranks 25th in Indiana, well below many municipalities that offer higher pay or other incentives. Our benefits help offset that gap and keep us competitive in recruiting and retention.

Our current negotiations are about the future of public safety. Cutting earned benefits without addressing pay gaps and injury protections will make it harder to attract and retain skilled firefighters, weaken readiness and ultimately put community safety at risk.

The city has made this benefit a talking point to cover for staffing failures under Chief Eric Lahey. Instead of addressing those failures, the focus has shifted to firefighters' use of relief time.

The millions in overtime costs came from chronic manpower gaps, not our five relief day average per firefighter. Recent headlines about adding firefighters acknowledge these shortages.

Lahey has offered wildly different numbers on this issue, telling firefighters at a station relief time costs \$2 million annually, while an Aug. 13 op-ed listed it as “north of \$1 million a year.” Yet in a May email, Lahey himself admitted: “Determining the actual cost savings for the proposal would be impossible.”

For more than a year, we have repeatedly requested an official, itemized cost analysis from the city. None has ever been provided. If the data doesn't exist and is impossible to calculate, how did it make its way to the media?

If city officials are discussing negotiation details and figures outside of mediation, they are not only misrepresenting the truth, but they are also undermining the good faith process they agreed to uphold.

Lahey's tenure has been marked by six-figure attorney fees, unreasonable decisions, federal lawsuits and negotiation delays. In the past, Mayor Tom Henry had to directly intervene to assist our members.

While Lahey and city leadership publicly voice support for firefighters, their actions often tell a different story.

Our voices have been disregarded in critical decisions, replaced with excuses instead of productive dialogue. Concerns are often met with hollow assurances, while policies are advanced that undermine operational readiness and morale.

Public praise is easy. Real support requires listening, acting on legitimate concerns, and valuing the input and experience of those on the front lines.

For decades, Fort Wayne firefighters have paid more toward their own benefits than any other city employee group in Indiana. We've shown fiscal responsibility in every contractual proposal and will continue to do so.

But decisions related to contractual benefits must be based on verified facts and data, not speculation or politics.

The city wants to frame this as solely a contract dispute. It is not. Our issues with leadership go far beyond the bargaining table.

More than 95% of Fort Wayne's 300 firefighters have called for new leadership. Regardless of how negotiations end, the fire department will only be at its best with a change at the chief's level. Our firefighters deserve a leader who instills trust, provides stability and values facts over political spin.

This is about a choice. Will Fort Wayne prioritize the safety of its citizens and the strength of its fire department, or will it continue to protect a failed fire chief?

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