

Firehouse stays shut in dispute over pay

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

Some members of the Orange Fire Department complained last week that city officials were renegeing on a promise to reopen the Washington Street firehouse.

"Washington Street firehouse closed again due to firefighters' deal to work for time bringing back laid-off firefighters ended July 1," a text message sent to the *Orange Transcript* stated. "We are right back to old tactics. The media should know about the Orange Fire Department and that the city does not want to pay overtime now due to understanding and the firefighters not working for time which we can never use."

The message's author asked to remain anonymous because he was not in a position to speak on behalf of members of the local firefighters' union. Firefighter Elvin Padilla, president of FMBA Local 10, could not be reached for comment.

The administration of Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. reached an agreement with the union in March that he said allowed the city to rehire 12 laid-off members of the department. Hawkins said the concessions included a five-day salary deferral; 55 hours of holiday pay; treatment of nonemergency overtime as compensatory time rather than paid time; and a ban on using compensatory time that would result in overtime pay. Hawkins said the \$3 million in savings depended on all the parties adhering to the negotiated guidelines.

Hawkins said he was not happy to hear about the anonymous texts. He said instead of getting angry with the city and his administration, the author should consider matters within the department.

"If the firehouse is closed, it's because the fire personnel closed it themselves," Hawkins said. "When we look at why that firehouse is closed, it was closed because people were calling out sick. While we have enough personnel to open that building, we do not have enough money to pay for overtime when they call out sick."

Hawkins said he thinks it was "awfully convenient that several of them decided to call out sick during the Independence Day weekend, which has a direct impact on our citizens." He said Orange now operates with a state-mandated 2 percent tax-levy cap because in the new fiscal reality "there are limits."

"We had \$1 million that we lost in the last fiscal year because people called out sick," said Hawkins. "Sick time is for when you're sick. If that firehouse is closed, it's because people called out sick."

Hawkins said when he made the deal with the firefighters, he believed overtime concessions would be followed.

"While additional fire personnel is always an added bonus, we don't compromise public safety," Hawkins said. "The city is protected, but the firemen have to do their part. To call out sick when we don't have that kind of money to spend is not responsible."

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