

Mayor: fire deal may save more money

Hawkins says estimates could be as high as \$700,000

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. said he believes the budget savings as a result of the agreement his administration reached with the city firefighters' union will be more than was previously reported.

Last week, based on comments from FMBA Local 10 President Elvin Padilla, the *Orange Transcript* reported the agreement involved a savings of \$197,000 plus additional concessions. The amount of the concessions may be hard to determine since the figure is fluid and based on need as determined by the circumstances which firefighters would deal with on a case-by-case basis.

Among the concessions were a five-day salary deferral to be paid when an employee leaves the department; 55 hours of holiday pay; treatment of nonemergency overtime as compensatory time rather than paid in cash; and a ban on using compensatory time that would result in overtime payments.

City officials said the concessions, combined with the layoffs of other municipal employees, allowed them to close a \$3 million budget gap. Hawkins had presented a \$54 million budget to the City Council that included a 14 percent municipal tax increase prior to the layoffs.

Hawkins said Padilla's response was partially accurate, but he said the savings in budget should be substantially more than what was reported in the newspaper last week.

"In addition to the hard givebacks, you have to add the savings of overtime now being earned as comp time," Hawkins said. "By my calculations the total

savings is approximately \$700,000. That's a big difference."

Apparently, the exact amounts involved in the agreement that returned 12 veteran firefighters who had been laid off back to their job and allowed for the hiring of 12 new firefighters to supplement their depleted ranks may only be known to City Business Administrator John Mason.

City Councilman Rayfield Morton said the council has sought detailed information about potential savings, but has not received anything. Morton said it would be a continuation of the council's frustration as they try to work out the details of the proposed 2011 budget.

"We asked the mayor and the business administrator how the deal would affect the budget, but they never gave us any answers," said Morton. "It's frustrating because we're trying to do the best job that we can possibly do for the taxpayers, but we're not getting any cooperation from the administration."

Hawkins said Morton and the rest of the council might not like how things played out, but that is how matters unfolded due to the city's fiscal problems.

"It might seem like we have been less than forthcoming with information or that we have taken too long to get the budget done," said Hawkins. "The fact of the matter is that the numbers we have been dealing with in regard to the budget have been changing based on the amount of state aid, federal funding and other grants, like the SAFER grant, that have to be figured into the budget because they have an impact on the bottom line, which is the tax rate our property owners have to pay to fund city government."

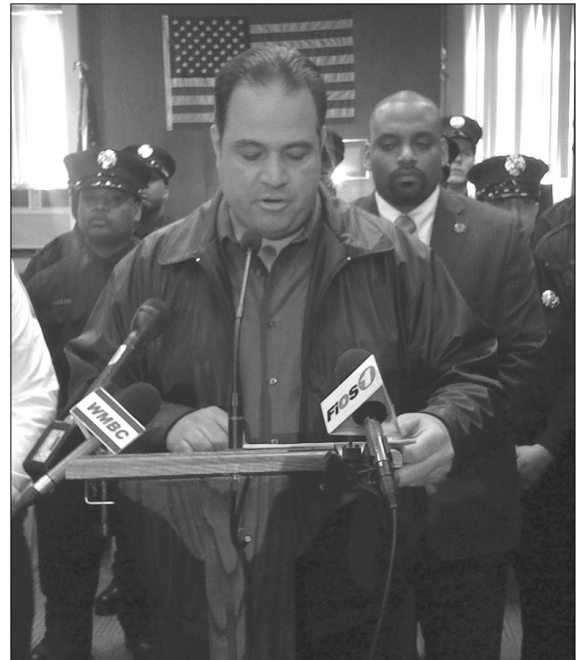


Photo By Chris Sykes

Firefighter Elvin Padilla, president of FMBA Local 10, discusses a labor agreement between city firefighters and the administration during a press conference last week.