

Mayor, laid-off firefighter in TV debate

By Chris Sykes
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Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. and a laid-off firefighter debated on a cable television network regarding issues affecting public funding and public employees.

Hawkins and Cleophas Bell appeared on a Cable News Network segment that focused on the fiscal challenges that face local governments nationwide. The piece explored the reasons behind the current crisis in public funding and the tactics of laying off previously "untouchable" public employees. Those positions, such as police officers and firefighters, had always been treated as sacrosanct in more prosperous times, but now are being reduced as cost-cutting measures.

Hawkins said while the layoffs of municipi-

pal employees in January was "unfortunate," the moves were "necessary." Bell countered that the fiscal belt-tightening, at the expense of dedicated employees such as himself and the other city employees who were trying to build productive, meaningful lives by living and working in the city was also "unfair."

Yvonne Eichner, another former Fire Department employee and city resident who was laid off, agreed with Bell. Eichner said that lost in the rush to cut the costs of public-sector jobs was the human "costs" of doing so.

"They kicked us to the curb and nobody is helping us," said Eichner. "It's a very low time for me right now because I'm one of the people who just got laid off from the Orange Fire Department. It's terrible."

Eichner said while it is understandable, and even justifiable, for Hawkins to emphasize the positive impact of the layoffs on Orange's budget to justify the actions he took, the mayor did not seem to understand that "everything and everyone in the city is connected." That means, said Eichner, every job lost is also a loss for the city since more people will not be able to pay property taxes or meet other obligations. That, she added, might mean having to relocate to help make ends meet.

"I'm a single parent and a widow who has a son in college and my daughter is in Catholic school. I'm trying to do it all by myself," said Eichner. "It's no consolation at all because we're still out of work and nobody's helping us. My sister also worked for the city in the Payroll Department, but she got laid off, too."