

ORANGE REHIRES 12 FIREFIGHTERS



BY WALTER ELLIOTT

ORANGE: The 12 Orange Fire Department rank and file officers who were laid off Jan. 11 should be back on the job by the time you read this.

The 12 firefighters swore, for the second time in their careers, to serve and protect Orange lives and property here at City Hall's Council Chamber at 1:26 p.m. March 25.

The group - after being congratulated by some 60 family members, friends, colleagues, media members, Mayor Eldridge Hawkins, Jr., Orange Fire Director Robert Manganello and other city civil servants - were then ushered into an across-hall conference room. The firemen, who have endured 63 days of unemployment, received their first shift reporting times from Manganello.

Those who were laid off due to municipal budget cuts can thank their OFD brothers and sisters who agreed to accept

some concessions proposed by Mayor Eldridge Hawkins, Jr.'s administration. The agreement, which was reached at 6 p.m. March 18, was the basis for the 30-minute re-inauguration.

The dozen firefighters, who have a collective 54 years' experience as Orange's

12 More to Come via Grant

bravest, could soon be overseen by superior officers who may be simultaneously back in their familiar posts.

Both Firefighters Mutual Benevolent Association Local 10 President Elvin Padilla and City of Orange Township Attorney Marvin T. Braker told "Local Talk" that negotiations with Fire Officers Association Local 210 representatives and the city administration were to resume later that afternoon. Both sides hope to come to

an agreement whereby the four superior officers who were demoted Jan. 11 can get their captains' rank back.

The 16 who are to be back at their posts may soon have 12 more firefighters to welcome - courtesy of the city's applying the \$1,238,623 million Federal Emergency

Management Agency's March 18 awarded Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant.

"Last year, knowing that layoffs were looming, we applied for a federal SAFER grant from FEMA to fund the hiring of new officers," said Hawkins during the ceremony. "What makes this agreement unique is that the city and the union cooperated to leverage the federal grant with work rule changes that,"

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in effect, doubles the federal money's benefits. Once we have our firefighters and officers back, we can advertise for new firefighters and do candidates' background checks."

The restorations and additions may also reopen the Washington Street fire station which has been shuttered since Jan. 11.

"We have to set a reopening timetable once we have our current and new fire personnel in place," added Hawkins. "The fire chief has discretion on that timetable - he may open it earlier if he feels so warranted."

There was a sense of relief from among all who attended the re-inauguration, which was frequently punctuated by applause, once the 12 firemen were sworn back in. The event was also a tempered celebration, given that the restoration of four fire captains and the possible resumption of rehiring negotiations among four of the city's other labor unions were ahead.

"We were negotiating with one bargaining agency at time," said Braker after the ceremony. "We kept renegotiating after Jan. 11 - it was a long and grueling process that both sides managed to keep frank and civil. We have the FOA next - and then the Police Benevolent Association, Superior Officers Association and Orange Municipal Employees Bargaining Association to see we can get our employees back."

Jan. 11 was when city administrators went ahead with laying off and demoting some of its uniform and civilian employees once labor talks failed to make sufficient progress by Jan. 7. The layoffs and demotions were controversial in part because the Hawkins administration wanted to complete negotiations before introducing its 2010-11 Municipal Budget to the council and the public.

"You've heard the expression, 'It's business, nothing personal,'" said Hawkins. "Up to a certain degree, it was business; we were facing some \$3 million in state aid cuts that would raise property taxes 14 percent

plus health insurance increases and pension payments that brought the increase up to a potential 20 percent. Beyond that degree, it was personal: many of the people we laid off were Orange residents who have mortgages to pay and families to feed."

Padilla said that the 12 firefighters laid off were relatively young in their careers. He said that half each had about six years' service and the other half each have three years' experience. He added that the 12 firemen's median age is 27.

The firefighters in question are: Mich Almendinger, Cleophas Bell, Nkomo Brooks, Joseph Gonzalez, Adonis Hannah, Abdul Hassan, Gerard Long, Vincent Piserchio, Ibin Raheem, Michael Regis, Nelson Rivera, and Joseph Trezza.

"I went through a lot of sleepless nights and rough days," said FMBA 10 President and Firefighter Padilla to the 12 just before their swearing-in at the council chamber well. "Not a night went by without thinking about how your next meal would come from. Not a day passed at headquarters without your names being mentioned."

Other speakers had noted that Padilla was splitting his time between negotiating with Braker and in Trenton - the latter pleading Orange's case for keeping OFD financially viable.

He and Manganelli - who, with the help of Orange Police Sgt. Deborah Upchurch, applied for the SAFER grant and waited for FEMA's word of awarding.

FEMA granted the two-year SAFER money on one blanket condition; that recently laid off firefighters be rehired before using the funds to hire more.

To meet that condition, the 32 still-on-the-job firefighters agreed to:

- Each FMBA Local 10 member give back 55 hours of holiday pay between Jan. 1 and June 30. Holiday pay will be incorporated into a firefighter's base salary on July 1.

- Each current member gives up three allocated sick days; the laid off 12 will have their allotments restored.

- Accumulated overtime between March 15 and June 30, except for emergencies, will be considered as compensatory time. This comp time will not be used as overtime.

- Five days' pay will be deferred, as per the local's 2008 Memorandum of Agreement with the city.

The speakers had plenty of thanks towards other involved parties to bestow, including:

- Deputy Fire Chief Michael Dowd, Orange Business Administrator John Mason and Hawkins Chief of Staff Stephanie Gidigbi.

- City attorney Joseph Wenzel and FMBA lawyers Eric Levine, David Fox and Carla Katz.

- FMBA 10 Negotiating Team Firefighters Mathew Kohaut, Ruben Padilla, Roberto Perez, Scott Rothenberger and Robert Hillman.

- Congressmen Frank Lautenberg, Robert Menendez, Bill Pascrell, Jr., and Donald Payne, Sr.

- State Assembly Speaker Shelia Y. Oliver and the Assembly and State Senatorial delegations of the 27, 28, 29 and 34th Legislative Districts.

- Essex County Freeholder Carol Clark.

The 12 rehired firefighters, as a group, gave an appreciation plaque to E. Padilla and an invitation to a dinner of his and his wife's choice in The Ironbound in Newark.

"We spend a lot of time away from our families," said presenting firefighter Raheem. "Elvin spent a lot more time, here or in Trenton, always fighting for us."

The rehiring allowed Firefighter Trezza to continue his family's 100-year tradition of serving Orange. He said that his cousin runs R. Trezza and Son junk dealer on Hickory Street and one uncle served as fire chief in the 1970s.

"I'm the ninth son of the last Trezza son, born in St. Mary's Hospital," said Trezza. "Another uncle, John, was councilman in the '70s and was mayor for a year. I'm single but the layoff was harder on those who started families."

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