



City Human Resources Director Carmen Caruth delivers her presentation on fire and police pay.



Police officers and firefighters fill the room at the Public Safety Committee meeting on Monday.

Report: W-S police, fire pay behind other cities

BY TODD LUCK
FOR THE CHRONICLE

The City Council's Public Safety Committee vowed to take action after hearing a report that police and firefighter salaries are significantly below other cities during its Monday, Dec 14 meeting.

City staff has spent several months looking into the pay for police and firefighters and its effects on retention in both departments. Two police officers spoke at a Nov. 16 City Council meeting bringing attention to how experienced officers are leaving for other higher paying departments. Police officers packed the City Council chambers for that meeting. Many returned, this time with firefighters who lined the walls during the meeting.

City Human Resources Director Carmen Caruth made the presentation showing how pay for police and firefighters, not including incentives, com-

pared to the rest of the Triad. Police trainees make \$31,494 that goes up to \$33,068 once they become officers. Fire trainees make \$29,852 annually and \$31,345 as new firefighters.

"What we found is that when we compare with the average of our Triad cities, we're significantly below for police officer trainees and firefighter trainees at 10 percent and when they're done with recruit school and firefighter school we're still below 6 and 9 percent," she said.

She said the disparity in pay also exists for more experienced officers, even assuming a 2 percent merit pay increase per year.

"At the end of five years with no other incentives, we are actually pretty significantly behind. We're 15 percent behind the average for the other jurisdictions, both in police officer and firefighter pay," she said.

Even adding in incentives, she said the pay is

still behind the Triad and is "even further behind" other cities in the state with at least 100,000 residents. She said the turnover rate for police is 12 percent and 10 percent for fire, with most leaving for another job or because of pay.

Public Safety Chair James Taylor said that the city has been giving small raises for public safety officers, but that it's "not been enough."

"The operative word here is 'action,'" said Taylor. "We've taken action in the past, but we need to do a better job and we will do a better job of taking action in the future."

The report suggested increasing starting police and fire pay by 7.5 percent, with salary adjustments for employees below the new minimum, so starting salaries would be within 3 percent of other Triad cities. There would also be supplemental pay adjustments for all fire and police employees, ranging from 1 to 3 percent, for five years.

Depending on the size of the supplement, the plan would cost \$1.2 million to \$2.3 million in the first year. Caruth said the plan is only to address the immediate recruitment and retention problem. City Council would still need to look at pay structure to deal with the long-term issue.

City Manager Lee Garrity said he'll incorporate the plan in the budget forecast that he'll present to the Budget Committee in January. He said he hopes to implement an annual 2 percent supplement each January starting this fiscal year, along with a possible merit raise in July, that could be potentially paid for with existing funds or "some adjustments in taxes and fees."

Lt. Danny Watts, who heads the Winston-Salem Police Department's recruiting unit, was one of the two police officers that spoke in front of the City Council last month. The officers told the council

that WSPD had lost 75 experienced officers to other departments since 2012 and that police officers were having to work off duty jobs providing security to make ends meet.

After Monday's meeting, Watts said the plan is a "step in the right direction."

"We do need a relatively quick solution so we can stop the exodus of officers leaving the department," he said.

However, Watts hoped to be on par with other departments' pay, instead of still being below it. He said implementing a step-pay plan - where employees receive raises on a regular basis - or some other type of pay plan, still needs to happen to solve the officer retention problem.

David Pollard, president of the Winston-Salem Professional Fire Fighters Association, said the plan does address the problem of relatively low pay for veteran firefighters.

Firefighters have similar issues to police with losing experienced personnel to other departments and firefighters having to work multiple jobs to support their families. He said the pay problem needs to be fixed across the board. A career ladder pay plan where employees receive raises based on training and certifications would help, he said.

Pollard said that increases in health insurance for city workers are outpacing the small raises firefighters get, resulting in veteran firefighters who have seen little increase in pay, so upping the salaries for new firefighters will only result in pay compression.

"What they're proposing is just completely inadequate," said Pollard, who added that the Fire Fighters Association plans to do its own independent study on fire pay.

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