

Why San Diego loses firefighters

By Richard W. Halsey
April 6, 2006

San Diego Fire Chief Jeff Bowman's resignation highlights an issue that has plagued San Diego for years; a chronic lack of support for the fire service.

Bonds and tax increases designed to improve funding for the Fire-Rescue Department are continually voted down. During and after the Cedar fire, shrill politicians pointed fingers of blame at firefighters rather than helping the community understand the inherent risks of living in North America's most fire-prone environment. Radio talk-show host Roger Hedgecock tried to convince the public that it was the lack of helicopter water drops and firefighter incompetence that allowed the Cedar fire to spread as far as it did.

Despite the fact that Hedgecock's perspectives were fatally flawed, another opportunity was lost to teach San Diegans that it is their responsibility to maintain a fire safe environment around their homes. During a post-Cedar fire community meeting, one citizen went so far as say that if the Fire-Rescue Department had been doing its job properly, more firefighters would have been killed.

Is there any wonder San Diego has 30 percent fewer fire personnel than other regions of comparable population? The reason is simple. The majority of San Diego voters are cheap and feel fire protection is an entitlement, having failed to properly understand the risks and costs associated with living in a fire-prone landscape. It's time San Diegans look into the mirror and ask themselves, "What value do I place on knowing a firefighter or paramedic will arrive in time when a family member is having a heart attack or our home is on fire?"

Maintaining an adequate fire department is a social contract that demands community involvement and strong financial support from the public. It can not be evaluated by private sector standards such as whether or not it "creates wealth" or is "competitive." These measures are irrelevant when determining the true value of public service, or any job for that matter.

The total value of an individual's life work is not limited to the cash he or she brings home or the profit created for his or her employer, but the contribution made to society. Unfortunately, based on the lack of support San Diegans give for public service jobs, sacrificing future wealth in order to help others is becoming an endangered virtue in our city.

Although many see the private sector as more efficient economically, endeavors concerned with "return on capital" typically fail to attract the type of people willing to risk their lives for others. A fire department that based its performance goals on monetary return for service would not engender much confidence.

Jobs that depend on personal sacrifice without promise of wealth are not ones easily administered by private corporations. The demands of the job do not financially pencil out to retain experienced professionals; individuals who subsidize the safety of the public must be subsidized by the public itself.

There is no substitute for the dedication of individuals who have chosen a career to serve the public good. After many years of service, a battalion chief in the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department makes about \$95,000 a year, working “on-duty” about 240 hours per month. When compared with an equal management position in the private sector, this is a bargain. But unlike private sector employees, professional firefighters maintain a standard of readiness 24 hours a day, every day.

What can a professional firefighter or paramedic actually do “off-duty” when there is a continual expectation that he or she will be ready and able to respond to a mandatory call-back order at any time? Certainly not enjoy the freedom to drink an extra glass of beer with friends or swim at the beach with the kids like the rest of us can do without hesitation.

Nor can he or she promise to be home for Christmas, school graduations or soccer games. How much is that kind of uncertainty worth on a paycheck? What value do we place on the possibility of having one's name etched on a firefighter memorial? Can such things command the same monetary reward as four-year degrees, qualify as highly skilled labor or justify supposedly “outrageous” overtime pay?

I really didn't know the answers to such questions until I was challenged by a U.S. Forest Service battalion chief to find out what confronting fire was really like instead of talking about it in abstractions as a fire scientist. Fortunately, I was able to accept the challenge by going thorough wildland firefighter training myself.

It was embarrassing about how much I had gotten wrong. It would be helpful for both our community and the success of our region's overall fire preparedness if some of the Fire-Rescue Department's critics would take the time to discover the same. They would realize, as I have, that firefighting personnel are worth a lot more than we are paying them.

As public servants, firefighters offer an invaluable service, and their compensation needs to reflect that fact. Serving the public good can not be evaluated by an expense sheet. Unfortunately, San Diegans don't understand these things, and we will continually lose good firefighters as a result. One of the reasons we lost San Diego Fire Chief Earl Roberts in 1984 was due to his frustration over the community's lack of support. We just lost Chief Bowman for similar reasons.

Perhaps, when the next Cedar fire burns into La Jolla instead of stopping at Miramar, San Diegans will experience a shift in attitude.

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