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Local reaction mixed on firefighters' overtime

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Kern County leaders were largely unfazed Tuesday by the amounts of overtime being paid to their firefighters, but said they would be open to looking for a cheaper way of doing business.

In the community, the revelation that many county firefighters earn more than \$100,000 a year has stirred substantial interest.

Opinions ranged from outrage at the vast sums being earned to anger at *The Californian* for raising questions about the pay amounts.

"(County firefighters) earn every penny," said Bakersfield resident Bonny Blake. "I bet if your house was burning down you wouldn't have a problem with them paying overtime to put it out."

The Californian requested the salary, overtime and other compensation for nearly 500 sworn fire department employees earlier this year. That information revealed 87 employees -- mostly captains and battalion chiefs -- had earned more than \$100,000 in 2001.

Much of that money comes from employees who work overtime, filling in for their vacationing and sick co-workers.

Supervisor Steve Perez said he was not surprised by the overtime-boosted pay.

"I don't care that they are making \$165,000 a year, or \$100,000 a year," he said. "As long as they are putting in the hours."

His colleagues for the most part agreed.

"I'm not worried about how much they are earning as much as I am about finding the cheapest way to (fill in for vacationing and sick firefighters)," said Supervisor Ken Peterson.

Peterson said he would be open to possibly reducing the amount of overtime being handed out, but only if a cheaper system could be found.

"This is going to be a business decision," he said.

County administrators said they are already analyzing the fire department's budget for next year and will look for cheaper ways to do the work.

But it doesn't look good, said County Administrative Officer Scott Jones.

The county is limited in what it can do because of the agreement it has with the firefighters' union, Jones said. That agreement calls for minimum staffing levels at all county fire stations.

So when a firefighter takes a day off, the county must find someone to fill in. Jones said it was unlikely that the county could save money without changing that provision -- something the firefighters' union probably won't support.

"Why would you want to do that?" asked union President Ken Blanton.

Blanton said those minimums are the only thing ensuring safety for the public and firefighters. Without the minimums, the number of firefighters at each station could be frequently reduced because of vacations or illness.

That would leave fewer firefighters to put out fires or rescue people.

"Minimum staffing levels are there to ensure safety," he said. "The national standard is a four-person engine and truck company. Ours are three- or two-person engines. We are already below the average."

Blanton also noted that the minimum staffing levels have remained largely unchanged since they were first established in the early 1990s.

Even with explanations, some residents were not pleased with the pay firefighters are collecting.

"These guys are getting rich on the county dime," said Bakersfield resident Tommy Johnson. "These guys are earning more than double my pay. How could we let it get to that point?"

Supervisor Barbara Patrick stressed that the board hasn't been asleep at the wheel when it comes to firefighter overtime. She noted that the board approved the hiring of 24 firefighters in 2000, specifically to cut back on overtime costs.

Those firefighters are expected to help save the county \$2 million in the upcoming year, according to fire officials.

The county has provided the newspaper with the salary and overtime information for local firefighters, but withheld the names of individuals and other forms of compensation.

Without the names, *The Californian* can not find out how individual firefighters racked up such large bouts of overtime. One battalion chief brought home \$162,500 in salary, overtime and other pay last year.

On Tuesday, the newspaper filed suit in Kern County Superior Court asking a judge to order the county to provide the names under provisions of the California Public Records Act. A court date hasn't been set.