10 Things You Need to Know About Asheville Firefighter Pay

1) **Every Asheville City employee is making $15/hr except 77 firefighters**. First responders, caregivers and essential workers are often undervalued, but as a community we can decide to more fairly compensate the very people that will run into a burning building in the middle of the night working a 24 hour shift on Christmas to save our lives. Firefighters are paid with our tax dollars, and we can demand that our tax dollars are used to pay them better.

2) **Firefighters are not making a living wage.** The City of Asheville is currently out of compliance with its own living wage policy when it comes to firefighter pay. The living wage policy passed June 25, 2013 uses Just Economics' Living Wage rate based on the cost of housing. With benefits, the wage floor as of July 1st, 2019 is $12.15/hr and as of July 1st, 2020 should be $14.00/hr. Right now, the lowest paid firefighters make $11.65/hr. The City is justifying this because the annual salary ($33,925 for 2912 annual hours) is above the annual salary of someone who works 40 hrs a week ($31,200).

3) **Firefighters should be compensated for every hour they work.** Firefighters work 24 hour shifts, a cost saving measure for the City rather than a benefit for firefighters. If firefighters worked 12 hour shifts or worked a 42 hour week, the City would have to hire significantly more firefighters to cover the workload and pay significantly more for benefits. While it is true that firefighters may get some sleep on their shift, they get calls through the night. According to a study quoted in Physician's Weekly, more than a third of firefighters screened positive for a sleep disorder. Firefighters put their mental and physical health at risk to do the job they do. The fact is that, like all workers, while at work, their time is not their own. They are away from their families and their lives and they should be compensated for every hour of it.

4) **Working a lot of hours should not be a reason for lower hourly pay.** Firefighters work an average of 2912 hours a year (equivalent to 364 eight hour days), while the average full time, 40 hour a week worker only works 2080 hours a year. City Councilman Vijay Kapoor says that working 24 hour shifts is a benefit of the job which allows firefighters to work a second job. Someone who is working ⅓ of their time should not have to work a second job to make ends meet. Firefighters have to work 800+ hours more than the lowest paid City employee to make nearly the same amount. Additionally, the annual income of Asheville's lowest paid firefighters would not qualify them for housing that is subsidized with our City tax dollars at 80% Area Median Income.

5) **Firefighter annual salary is low compared to other cities in NC.** North Carolina is in the lowest fifth of US states in firefighter pay. Even by NC's low standards, Asheville tends to pay lower than other NC cities with a population above 50,000. While the City of Asheville is waiting for the completion of a wage and compensation study, Just Economics collected firefighter starting pay data from the websites of other NC cities with a population of 50K or more. JE easily found pay information for 13 of the 18 cities

and only the City of Fayetteville pays less than Asheville. According to HUD, Asheville has the highest Fair Market Rent in the state for a one bedroom apartment. Our high cost of living and low pay make it difficult for firefighters to make ends meet.

6) **Firefighter starting pay is significantly less than police officer pay.** Police officers have a starting pay of $17.17 in Asheville and their starting pay is around $3,500 more annually than our firefighters for less work hours. While all first responders (alongside many essential workers) tend to be underpaid in our community, firefighters seem to be more undervalued than other public employees in Asheville.

7) **The City of Asheville has a higher than projected reserve fund that could pay firefighters**. This is an incredibly uncertain financial time. The City is wise to be conservative with spending considering the significant loss of sales tax and other revenue, but this is not a time to undervalue first responders on the frontlines of this pandemic. The City of Asheville aims to have a 15% reserve for their budget that is meant to be used in "rainy day" situations. The City currently has a near 18% reserve and this is exactly the type of "rainy day" scenario that reserve funds are meant to be used for. The City is using reserve funds to cover the gap in income and expenses in the 2021 budget - the City could use those same funds to raise firefighter pay.

8) **This is not a new problem.** The Asheville Fire Fighters Association brought up firefighter pay in previous budget cycles and were told to wait. They are being told to wait again. The City has named concerns about wage compression, but the longer it goes unresolved, the larger the City's concerns about wage compression grow. Wage compression is a concern that when you raise the newest people on the job up, there is little separation between people who have been on the job for a longer period of time. This "problem" only gets worse if the City doesn't address it now.

9) **Firefighters do not get the same overtime or holiday pay as most other City employees**. Federal law around overtime is different and more complicated for firefighters than it is for most other workers. Firefighters do not get paid overtime after 40 hrs (they have to work over 56 hours to get OT) and don't receive holiday or premium pay while working on Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, etc. Starting firefighters at $15/hr would be the least the City could do, given the other drawbacks in their compensation.

10) **First responders deserve fair pay!** It has never been more apparent than during this pandemic. Firefighters are selfless public servants who absolutely deserve community advocacy and $15/hr!

If you are interested in sharing your opinion about firefighter pay with City Council as they go through this budget process, you can email all of Council at ashevillenccouncil@ashevillenc.gov or find individual contact information for City Council members here: https://www.ashevillenc.gov/government/meet-city-council/