

TALKING ABOUT

News from the Village Community Development Districts

Negotiations Between District and Public Safety Department Have Been Misrepresented

By **JANET TUTT**
District Manager

During my public sector employment, I have been either directly or indirectly involved with the collective bargaining process and personnel issues since the mid-1980s and have had the opportunity to work with and help improve wages, benefits and working conditions for all employees, including firefighters, in three different government agencies.



Janet Tutt

Providing employees with fair wages and benefits, and a safe working environment, has always been a priority for me and the Village Center District Supervisors. As district manager, I can assure you the current negotiations between the District and the Firefighters union have been no different.

What has not been accurately portrayed, despite being presented at the public bargaining sessions, are the proposals the District has made to the union, which stand directly contrary to the union's claim that the District does not value its firefighters. The District has proposed to increase starting wages for firefighter-EMTs by 5 percent, firefighter-paramedics by 10 percent,

and lieutenants by 8.8 percent. This would provide among the highest starting wages in the local market.

We also have proposed wage increases for the upcoming fiscal year of 3.5 percent for all bargaining unit employees and an additional 2 percent to 3 percent wage adjustment based on longevity. Added to this are new incentive pays, increased ride-up pay, increased preceptor pay, increased paramedic tuition reimbursement, and an acceleration of the \$10,000 paramedic incentive.

Regarding retirement, the District is not alone in providing retirement benefits through a defined contribution plan. Recently, the Jacksonville Fire Rescue Department, one of the largest departments in the nation, changed their retirement to a defined contribution plan for all new hires. Over the years, I have worked hard to improve the retirement plan for the District's firefighters, and currently, the District contributes 15 percent of the firefighters' salaries into the plan with no required contribution from the firefighters. The proposal that the District has made to the union would increase the total amount contributed each year into the employees' retirement accounts over the term of the contract, with employee voluntary matches, to up to 21 percent of their salaries per year, of which the maximum voluntary

matches from employees would be up to 3 percent.

Finally, regarding the number of firefighters on an engine, this issue affects, on average, about 1 percent of the District Public Safety Department's service calls. However, as Chief Edmund Cain stated at the bargaining table, we already have proposed in the upcoming budget to add more firefighter positions, and are in the final stages of developing the plan to increase staffing on our engines.

The real disagreement with the union lies in the union's continued demand that the District either waive our statutory management rights and include mandatory staffing levels in the contract or, alternatively, pay each firefighter up to \$14,500 more per year until engine staffing is increased to their satisfaction. Neither alternative is reasonable.

In sum, contrary to the misrepresentations that have been publicly made about me, members of my bargaining team or the safety in this community, I continue to have the utmost respect for the District Public Safety Department employees and the exemplary services they provide every day to the residents of The Villages. The proposals we have made are fair, include improvements in a number of areas such as wages and retirement, and can be fiscally supported to the multiple governing bodies responsible for funding the District Public Safety Department with your tax dollars.

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