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Firefighters could see pay increase

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By John Flowers

ADDISON COUNTY — Two of the county's largest fire departments have taken steps to boost compensation for their members. The goals are to better reflect the sacrifices firefighters make for their communities, and to attract and retain good firefighters.

The Middlebury selectboard on Jan. 11 endorsed Fire Chief David Shaw's request for a raise in firefighter compensation from the current \$12 per hour to \$15, for time they spend battling fires and taking the training necessary to maintain their certification and field-readiness.

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“The most valuable asset we have is human. We can buy all the red, shiny trucks you want and we can build beautiful facilities, but without human resources, we're in trouble.”

— Middlebury Fire Chief David Shaw



BRISTOL FIRE CHIEF BRETT LAROSE

Shaw's proposal also calls for a cost-of-living adjustment every other year, and it replaces the current three-tier compensation scheme with the flat, \$15-per-hour stipend.

"Nobody is here for the money, I can guarantee that," Shaw said. "But in trying to boost (our ranks) and experience level, our compensation package helps a little."

Meanwhile, the Bristol selectboard on Monday agreed with Fire Chief Brett LaRose's call for current firefighter compensation to be extended to the 42 hours of training, and firehouse/equipment maintenance work that members are currently performing on their own time. Bristol firefighters are now rewarded at the prevailing minimum wage (\$12.55 per hour) for time spent responding to blazes and other public safety calls.

Bristol, Middlebury and Vergennes also provide firefighters with other basic benefits that include life insurance and accidental death payments.



Bristol and Middlebury voters will get a final say on their firefighters' compensation at town meeting on March 1 when fiscal year 2023 municipal budgets are decided.

"It's part of the departments' retention and recruitment program that we have in place and we're trying to advance," Shaw explained of efforts to reward personnel. "The most valuable asset we have is human. We can buy all the red, shiny trucks you want and we can build beautiful facilities, but without human resources, we're in trouble."

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

While Addison County's municipal fire departments are volunteer-driven, many communities assign nominal compensation to members to recognize the financial hardship they might experience leaving their jobs at a moment's notice to respond to emergencies. Some employers compensate workers

while they're toned out; others don't. And the rate of pay volunteer firefighters receive on duty is in most cases quite a bit lower than what they command in their 9-5 jobs.

Shaw said Middlebury has had a firefighter compensation plan for more than 50 years. It's been considered a "monetary thank you," as opposed to a competitive wage.

He noted Middlebury's approximately \$74,000 annual salary budget for firefighters wouldn't pay for even one professional firefighter, at today's labor and benefits rates.

"I think the town fully understands that," Shaw said. "They understand they're getting 39 members providing a service for less than it would cost for one full-time member. And it's the same for Bristol and Vergennes; their (citizens) know what's being provided to them."

Chief Shaw would ideally like to have 50 firefighters in his department in order to assure consistent, adequate turnout for emergency calls. Middlebury firefighters typically leave the station around 260 times a year at all hours of the day, according to Shaw.

At this point, Middlebury is fielding an average of around 15 members per call.

"To get enough human resources to take care of that can be difficult, at times," he said. "Even the (new) compensation package we have doesn't cover the volunteer hours given here."



MIDDLEBURY FIRE CHIEF David Shaw, shown at a past fire scene, hopes \$15 per hour for fighting fires will attract a few more members to his department.

Photo by Mark Bouvier

He estimated that for every 50 hours a firefighter might spend on duty, the community usually gets another 50 from that individual in the form of volunteer labor.

And that labor is at a premium right now.

“The market is very competitive for volunteers,” Shaw said.

Middlebury’s current fire personnel is a mix of seasoned, skilled firefighters and folks relatively new to the force. Shaw is concerned about the current dearth of experienced firefighters, those in their 40s.

“I don’t know where those people went in emergency services, but I know they’re not here and they’re not at other departments,” he lamented. “It’s concerning.”

IN BRISTOL

Meanwhile, in Bristol, firefighters aren’t in store for a raise, but they could soon (pending voter approval) be remunerated for more hours spent in service to the town. Specifically, Chief LaRose’s proposed budget would compensate each firefighter at \$12.55 per hour for:

- The state-mandated 24 hours each spends every year in training to maintain their firefighter certification.
- Six hours of additional, in-house training.
- Three hours of station maintenance chores.
- Nine hours of vehicle inspection/maintenance duties.

The bottom line: This would net each of the current 34 Bristol firefighters around \$525 per year for training and chores they’re currently absorbing for free.

“By compensating them for those required trainings and other things they need to do at the fire station, to me, emphasizes their place in the municipal body here,” LaRose said.

Bristol also provides an additional annual stipend to its officers — ranging from \$750 for lieutenants to \$4,000 for the chief — in recognition of the extra training and hours they must put in.

The extra compensation for firefighters would add around \$15,500 to the budget, and is reflected within an overall FY’23 Bristol Fire Department spending proposal of \$333,427 — a 3.6% increase.

“The board was very open to what we were proposing,” LaRose said.

Vergennes’s 35 firefighters currently receive \$8 per hour for time spent on service calls, as well as for mandatory training sessions — a CPR recertification and a Hazmat refresher, according to Chief

Jim Bruer.

City and fire officials have been discussing the current compensation level for possible adjustments. The \$8 level is \$4.55 less than the state's minimum hourly wage. Like Shaw, Bruer noted firefighters aren't in it for the money, but defraying some of the financial hardship would be welcome. There's also a legal question — if firefighters are considered part-time municipal employees, it at least raises questions about whether compensation can dip below state minimum wage standards.

"I kind of look at it from a business point of view — if you've got an hourly employee, any work they do is supposed to be compensated," Bruer said. "If they work the hours, they should be compensated."

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