

COMMENTARY

Pay those firefighters



I was shocked last week to learn that all over Lee County, firefighters are not being paid enough. Only about half of the 1,200 men and women employed by fire districts here were reported to be earning more than \$70,000, and I think something has to be done about it.

The first thing I recommend, of course, is the most obvious.

Since we're in a recession, it might be difficult to find the money in existing budgets or the pockets of taxpayers to boost the salaries of the other half up over \$70,000, too.

But politicians and lawyers have a lot of money. So the obvious thing to do is either, A: tax them heavily in order to increase the salaries of firefighters; or B: require politicians and lawyers to put in 20 hours of community service working for a firefighting company every week, so firefighters won't have to work so much overtime after their ranks have been decimated by layoffs.

In particular, Pat McCourt.

Mr. McCourt is a Bonita Springs city councilman who blithely announced to the local daily newspaper that "we need them when we need them, but most of the time they sit there with their thumb in their ear."

First of all, I have never seen a fire-

fighter sit anywhere with his or her thumb in his or her ear. They just don't do it. I have seen politicians do it, and I've even seen them put their thumbs somewhere else, too. But since my mother might hear this column, I can't say where.

Mr. McCourt, therefore, should spend 40 hours a week — not 20, like other city council members or the county commissioners — doing community service for a fire company, until the firefighters in Lee County vote otherwise.

Mr. McCourt would then get to give thanks for a free education. He wouldn't have to pay for it, and he wouldn't be paid for it, either, except in wisdom.

He could learn, for example, that the majority of action calls to a fire station come from people suffering, or watching others suffer. They're medical calls.

If Mr. McCourt is dreaming away happily about thumbs and ears at 2 a.m., and the call comes in, he might learn what it's like to get up, get dressed, get out — this is something like boot camp, without the yelling or the weapons — and drive through the night to a place where someone is A: dying. B: bleeding heavily. C: trying to breathe, bleeding heavily and dying at the same time. Or D: etc.

The firefighters and emergency medical personnel I know — often they're the same person, depending on what's happening at the scene — can't get through a year or sometimes even

a season without seeing a parade of misery: limbs torn off; skulls or bodies smashed; bodies jerking rhythmically in the final movements of a life, from heart attacks or violent injuries, as firefighters try to save them with the tools taxpayers have bought them, and the courage their parents gave them; suicides; or things you haven't even thought of, and Mr. McCourt hasn't either.

Oh, did I mention fires? Let me mention them. Fires. From a distance, interesting, fascinating, a big wow. Up close, no fun at all.

The one adventure any veteran firefighter faces (I use that word, adventure, in the old sense, meaning "to come to" something, even something unhappy, like a life-altering realization) — the one adventure that can permanently alter a firefighter's temperament and mental health, many of them say, is the suffering and dying of children, right on the spot, when they can't do a damn thing about it.

It's happened to all of them who have stood in the job for awhile, and coming back from it, mentally — coming back to their wives or husbands and their own kids — is a trick none of us want to have to try.

But they do, day after day after night after night after year after year. If you want to see some very strong people, go meet some firefighters.

Now, I admit, Mr. McCourt and others have rightly suggested that some firefighters have taken advantage of the system to boost their take-home pay into the stratosphere.

But when I hear these criticisms or read the statistics — 152 of them in dis-

tricts across Lee County earn \$100,000 or more, and a handful earn as much, say, as the county attorney (more than \$150,000) — I don't rush off in a frenzy insisting that "firefighters" are just greedy little buggers sitting around with their thumbs in their ears.

Instead, I think to myself (think along with me, here, Pat): Every organization has some greedy people. And every organization answers to somebody. In the case of firefighters, they answer ultimately either to county commissioners or city council members — or at least their leaders do.

And I think this, too: that when people go around blaming the greed and selfishness of the few on the many, they aren't thinking clearly.

And finally, they aren't thinking clearly when they blame out-of-line salaries on the union. I don't consider \$70,000 out of line in the least, not for what firefighters have to do, which is why all of them should make at least that much.

You wouldn't do it, I'm not doing it, and Pat McCourt will only do it when he gets ordered to perform community service.

But for those who do make too much, whose responsibility is it to yank their fat rear-ends back into line? Oddly enough, it's a politician's responsibility — in this county and most of the time.

Since we live in a so-called "right to work" state, history has shown that such a yanking isn't too hard to do, unions or no unions.

And when a politician can't find a way to do it?

Well, there's always the voting booth. Maybe another one can. ■

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