

Some firefighters near top of city payroll

Overtime cited in report of highest-paid employees

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SAN DIEGO – For the second consecutive year, San Diego firefighters are listed prominently among the city's highest-paid employees, bringing home more money than some top executives.

The information is laid out in a city payroll report obtained by the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. It ranks the highest-paid 1,000 employees in 2006. There were about 11,000 employees on the payroll last year.

The report, dated Feb. 20, surfaces as police and fire unions seek pay raises in ongoing contract negotiations with the city. The rankings are based on pay and fringe benefits, including car allowances and executive health insurance. Pension and standard health care are not included.

Among the findings:

- Sixty-five percent of the overtime earned was paid to firefighters.
- Overtime accounted for about one-third of the income earned by 30 employees, including 24 firefighters.
- City Attorney Mike Aguirre, Police Chief William Lansdowne and Auditor and Comptroller John Torell earned the highest pay, \$205,000. The report says none of the three were paid overtime. Torell earned 20 percent more than the previous year.
- Torell took home almost \$20,000 in fringe benefits and reimbursements, the most in the city. Rich Snapper, the city's personnel director, was right behind him.

Mayor Jerry Sanders, who didn't make the list, said the overtime statistics concern him, especially in the face of the city's murky finances. "Anytime you see that much overtime in the fire department it's a concern," Sanders said. "It's a lot of money. And I want to make sure our money is being spent effectively. It may be perfectly legitimate, but there might be a better method."

Sanders said he plans to meet with Fire Chief Tracy Jarman.

"There's a host of issues to look at," he said.

Sanders earned \$100,000, but because he receives a pension as a 26-year Police Department employee, he voluntarily reduced his pay to \$36,000. Although city analysts predict San Diego's budget gap could grow to more than \$100 million in two years, the compensation issue for police and firefighters is hardly new.

A salary survey released last week showed take-home pay for most firefighters is subpar when compared

with 22 other fire agencies in Western states. A similar survey released in December listed take-home pay for city police at or near the bottom of 19 law enforcement agencies. The surveys, though, did not include overtime.

The lowest-paid employee in the top 1,000 was a police sergeant who got \$99,366.

Two dispatchers were among the highest-paid police employees. A supervisor earned \$121,000, including \$43,000 in overtime. A lead dispatcher earned a base pay of \$68,000 and overtime of \$51,000.

Assistant Police Chief William Maheu said dispatch has been short-staffed for more than a year.

“That’s our hardest hire, and it’s the only place in the department where we have mandatory overtime, because, obviously, when you call 911 you expect someone to be there,” Maheu said.

Not a single council member cracked the list, but eight council staffers did. Without fringe benefits, council members earn \$75,000.

In 2005, there were nine firefighters among the 20 highest paid. Last year, there were seven. Assistant Fire Chief Javier Mainar cited three reasons: staffing requirements, automatic overtime and a decision to pay overtime in lieu of filling vacancies.

There are about 260 firefighters on duty every day. Each works nine 24-hour shifts over a 28-day cycle, eating and sleeping at the station. They work a 10th shift every third cycle.

A concept called constant staffing, used in several big cities, means four firefighters are assigned to each engine, and another four to every truck. If someone is out, the position is always filled by a substitute who would typically work at least a 24-hour overtime shift.

“So, if one is gone for any reason – vacation, illness, training, injury – we back-fill,” said Mainar, who oversees human resources, payroll and other support services for the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department.

Firefighters earn at least three hours of overtime during their 56-hour workweeks because overtime is paid after 53 hours. An unwritten policy also helps firefighters rack up overtime. Department officials have intentionally left vacancies open because “it’s cheaper to pay the overtime than to hire a new employee,” Mainar said.

Overtime costs the city 1.5 times an employee’s base pay, but a new firefighter would cost 1.68 times his or her base because of benefits, retirement and other costs, Mainar said.

Fully-staffed, the fire agency has 916 firefighters. There are 56 vacancies that are expected to be filled, but an additional 50 expected over the next year won’t be, Mainar said.

Sanders has asked Jay Goldstone, the city’s chief financial officer, to review the department’s rationale for paying overtime.

“Because it’s a tremendous amount of money,” Sanders said.

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