

Fire scheduling splits council

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A dispute over a proposed change to firefighters' schedules has split the Austin City Council.

The Austin Fire Committee had recommended that the council change the schedule from the current 10-hour shifts to 24-hour shifts, followed by 48 hours off. The change was proposed by Fire Chief Mickey Healey.

But two separate motions failed by 4-3 margins at the council meeting May 16. After a motion to table discussion until the next work session failed, council member Steve King made a motion to let Healey determine the schedule. Marion Clennon, King and Judy Enright voted yes; Brian McAlister, Jeff Austin, Roger Boughton and Janet Anderson voted no.

"There's not much middle ground on issues when it comes to the fire department," Austin said. "I don't think that means we can't work together and come to a solution. I just think it's something most people have a strong belief one way or the other."

King said it's the first 4-3 vote he remembers in his time on the council. "So you can see it kind of divides us."

King explained his support for the new schedule is that it's a management issue, and the council should "steer away from managing and focus on governing."

But Austin said management control is needed. "You have to have something spelled out that says, we will be engaged 'x' number of hours per day, or from this time to that time. I guess that was one of the questions that never got answered."

Healey said the teams are getting the work done, but each day is different depending on what must be accomplished and how many emergency calls there are.

"We're not asking for more people," Healey said. "We're not asking to do less with more, like we've been accused of."

The schedule change won't cost the city any more, he said.

"You are paying the same amount of money no matter which schedule these individuals are on," Healey said. "The difference between the two schedules is basically how well my part-time guys and my full-time guys can interact and the health of my shifts."

Firefighters also do a lot of maintenance and work at the station, rather than contract jobs out, Healey said. For example, they test 36 air packs that would cost \$65 apiece, or more than \$2,300 total, to be tested elsewhere. That saves taxpayers money, Healey said.

Emergency calls can't be scheduled, Healey said. "There's really no set formula out there that can guarantee from this time to this time that you're not going to have any calls or anything," he said. "So being prepared 24 hours a day to go out and handle the emergencies is our first priority."

Austin also questioned the value of studies showing that the 10-hour schedule was unhealthy for firefighters,

as they were from places like Toronto and New York City.

"I don't know how relevant that is really to Austin, Minn.," Austin said.

Healey, who has been chief since July 2010, said that the firefighters didn't like the existing 10-hour schedule.

"Looking at all the different schedules that are out there, the 24/48 that I proposed is a very common one," Healey said. "It's utilized by a lot of different agencies."

What's next for the fire department schedule?

Austin said in his mind, the issue is settled and the schedule will stay as it is.

"In the meetings, it basically became clear that the chief is dead set on 24/48, and that's the only thing he wants to talk about," Austin said.

Healey said he's accepted that the department will be working under the 10-hour shift schedule.

"I don't think it's very cohesive, and I don't think it's a very healthy schedule for these guys to be on," he said. "But the council has made their decision. We respect the council decision."