

Fire hall hours remain the same for now

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The Austin City Council was divided Monday night over a proposal to move firefighters from 10-hour shifts to a 24/48 schedule, meaning they'd work 24-hour shifts followed by 48 hours off.

Two different motions failed, each by 4-3 margins, leaving nothing resolved on the issue. The fire committee had recommended May 5 to change the schedules back from 10-hour shifts to 24-hour shifts.

"I don't think I have to remind the council of the importance of this decision," said Austin Fire Committee member and council member Steve King. "It's taken months to get where we're at today, so I don't want it to be set back any further.

"The big picture to me is it's the chief's decision."

The department has been as cohesive now as it has been in 17 years, King said.

"If this schedule brings healthier, happier employees, I don't see a downside to it," King said.

Fellow Austin Fire Committee member Judy Enright, and council member Marian Clennon echoed King's comments. Enright said the 10-hour shift schedule is unhealthy for firefighters, especially for the sleep patterns it results in. Both women said they would like to see the schedule recommendation come from Fire Chief Mickey Healey.

On the other side of the coin, council member Roger Boughton said he would vote against the 24/48 schedule because firefighters' work days per month would drop from 21 to 11 days.

"I don't think it makes us a safer community," Boughton said. "I think this is a labor issue, and it's not a safety issue."

Boughton said he had received more feedback and inquires on this issue in the past few weeks than anything else; council member-at-large Janet Anderson later agreed with him.

For Austin Fire Committee and council member Jeff Austin and Anderson, questions still loomed. Austin voted against bringing the scheduling motion to the city council at the May 5 fire committee meeting.

Council member Brian McAlister expressed his displeasure with the 24-hour shift, which is three days pay, only amounting to eight hours of "so-called productive time."

"I cannot vote for this change," McAlister said. "There's no other business in Austin or anywhere else that I am aware of that has any schedule that allows hanging around and sleeping on the taxpayers' dollar."

The first motion on the fire department scheduling, made by McAlister, to table the discussion until the next work session, failed, with Enright, Clennon, Austin and Boughton voting no, and McAlister, King and Anderson voting yes.

Following that failed motion, King made a motion to let Healey determine the schedule. Only Clennon, Enright and King voted yes.

With that, nothing regarding the schedules is set in stone, said Mayor Tom Stiehm. He added that he was glad he did not have to cast a vote on this subject.

"This is a touchy issue," Stiehm said. "It's come up before. I would expect to see it again at some point in the future."