

Agreement is reached, firefighters return

Grant will allow for 12 new hires

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

The spirit of reconciliation and triumph was in the air in the City Council chamber at City Hall Tuesday afternoon as Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. and Fire Chief Robert Manganelli presided over a swearing-in ceremony for the 12 firefighters who had been laid off in January to help balance the proposed municipal budget.

The firefighters were rehired March 15 when the Hawkins administration announced it had reached an agreement with the firefighters' union, FMBA Local 10. The announcement was made that night during the City Council meeting.

So while Tuesday's ceremony was a formality that city officials said needed to be done, it seemed to have a greater feeling for firefighters Cleophas Bell, Michael Regis, Nelson Rivera, Joseph Trezza, Ibin Raheem, Abdul Hassan, Adonis Hannah, Vincent Piserchio, Nkomo Brooks, Joseph Gonzalez, Michael Almdinger and Gerard Long.

"On March 15 at 6 p.m., we were able to extinguish the fires of adversity with our Fire Department," said City Attorney Marvin Braker. "But no deal is done until I get the signature of the CEO of the city, my boss, the mayor. Referring to Manganelli's predecessor, the late Fire Chief Martin DeMarzo, Braker continued: "Chief Manganelli has had to fill some big shoes since he took over the department, and I think that everybody knows that Marty DeMarzo would be happy about today."

Braker's invocation of the name of DeMarzo, who was well-regarded and known as an outspoken advocate for the city and the Fire Department and the men under his command, seemed to fit in with the

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fire chief**

atmosphere of the ceremony. Hawkins said it reminded him of "family" and the need to settle the other outstanding labor issues with the city's other employee unions.

"This is a very, very proud day in our city and it also sets a precedent in what can be done by municipal government, but there are still members of our Orange family who are out of work," Hawkins said. "The agreement we reached with the union protects taxpayers from a crushing tax increase and it makes all residents and businesses in Orange safer. It increases the on-the-job safety of firefighters, and it brings back those who have lost their jobs."

Even though the administration was able to reach an amicable deal with the firefighters, Hawkins said, there was still work to be done with the union that represents the superior officers in the department. The FMBA only represents rank-and-file members. The Superior Officers Association is the other bargaining agent.

"There are four members of the SOA who we have already been negotiating with," Hawkins said. "We will be sitting down with them again to continue working on a deal. But the deal with the FMBA is unique because the city and the union cooperated to leverage the federal grant with work-rule changes that in effect double the



Photo By Chris Sykes

Fire Chief Robert Manganelli discusses the agreement which enabled 12 laid-off firefighters to regain their positions.

benefits of the federal money."

Hawkins said the agreement would not have been possible without the firefighters union. He thanked Manganelli and Firefighter Elvin Padilla, the union's president, for working toward the agreement.

"This would never have happened if the unions were not diligent and did not sit down to get this done," Manganelli said. "The days were hard and the fights were tough, but we were able to accomplish something that no one thought that we would be able to do. We're really not finally done because the officers union is going to sit down today and we have a couple of cap-

tains who were demoted who need to get back to their regular status."

Padilla agreed DeMarzo would have been happy to see how everything turned out, but he said the "family" Hawkins referred to would not be whole until all unions complete agreements.

"Our motto in the fire service is that no one gets left behind," Padilla said. "That's why, even though we did not all get laid off like the 12 guys that we're bringing back and other city employees did, we were with them in spirit. Although we did not all endure the physical layoffs, we all endured the emotional and spiritual suffering."

Union agrees to concessions

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. said he hopes that the details of the deal his administration was able to make the members of the city firefighters union can be a model for other municipalities that are struggling with similar labor and fiscal issues.

Hawkins announced last week the city had struck an agreement with the union representing the rank-and-file members of the Orange Fire Department with the help of a federal grant that had been awarded to Orange a few days earlier.

The mayor said the federal money not only allowed the city to re-hire 12 firefighters who had been laid off in January to help balance the municipal budget, but that it would lead to the hiring of 12 additional firefighters.

The personnel actions would increase the Fire Department's manpower from its current level of 50 firefighters to 74. Union officials have stated it still was short of the 80 for which the department was budgeted in the past.

"This increases our firefighting force by 50 percent and brings our fire department closer to full strength," Hawkins said Tuesday following a ceremony to swear in the returning firefighters.

"Last year, knowing that layoffs were looming, we applied for a federal grant to fund the hiring of new firefighters," the mayor continued. "At the same time, we asked our unions for enough givebacks to avoid layoffs by making up for Gov. Christie's cuts in state aid."

Hawkins said 20 percent reductions in salary and benefits were necessary to protect Orange's taxpayers. Without them, he said, city taxes would have increased beyond