

## 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 a level he believed property owners could afford.

"Unfortunately, we were not able to reach an agreement by the Jan. 7 deadline for layoffs, but both sides continued talking in the hope of finding common ground," said Hawkins.

"On March 18, we reached an agreement for changes in work rules that enabled us to bring back the 12 laid-off firefighters. The givebacks include a five-day salary deferral to be paid when an employee leaves the Fire Department; a giveback of 55 hours of holiday pay; treatment of non-emergency overtime as comp-time rather than paid in cash; and a ban on using comp-time that would result in overtime payments."

City officials said the givebacks, combined with the layoffs of other city employees, allowed them to close what they said was a \$6.4 million budget gap that made them necessary.

Hawkins had introduced a proposed \$54.1 million budget which is under review by the City Council. He said the budget spends \$3.2 million less than during the 2010 fiscal year, but still required a \$701 increase in taxes on the average assessed property due to the decrease in state aid.

The council conducted a special meeting Monday to discuss possible amendments. Calls to Council President Hassan Abdul-Rasheed were not returned.

While a tax increase was proposed in the introduced budget, Hawkins said it would not result because of the Fire Department. Firefighter Elvin Padilla, president of FMBA Local 10, agreed.

"The total of the agreement that we signed with the city was for \$197,000 plus givebacks," Padilla said. "The reason I say 'plus' is because the comp-time in lieu of overtime is based on sickout and vacations."

Hawkins said the \$1.2 million SAFER grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency will allow the city to hire 12 new firefighters at no cost to taxpayers. The grant, according to the agency, is to be used to fund salaries and benefits for new hires.