

Volunteer firefighters turn pro, cause tension



The Crozet Volunteer Fire Department is one of the last in the area that does not employ career firefighters. Photo: Crozet Volunteer Fire Department

News



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A long-debated issue resurfaced at a recent Albemarle County Board of Supervisors' meeting when lifetime firefighters expressed concern that professionals in the county fire department cannot also serve as volunteers. County officials say they need to keep the camps separate to comply with the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. But some fire department members think changing local rules could help improve the relationship between career and volunteer firefighters.

The county uses a combined fire and rescue system, utilizing more than 700 volunteers and about 100 career staff, which Fire Chief Dan Eggleston said is typical of an urbanizing rural area like Albemarle. While it's economically necessary, it has led to some tension among the ranks.

"The history of issues and potential conflicts go back to the Benjamin Franklin days," Eggleston said.

The volunteer and paid departments used to be independent of one another. Eggleston said there's been fear on both sides of losing autonomy and a sense of

identity, and it's easy for him to see the frustration from everyone's point of view.

"Our objective is to try to retain these people, because they know the system and have proven themselves," he said. "It's tough, and we can't turn away good people. But on the volunteer side, they put all that effort and time into training someone, only for them to become a career."

Crozet Fire Department President Rodney Rich spoke at the April 3 Board of Supervisors meeting, and said every time a firefighter is hired, that's one more that can no longer serve the county as a volunteer.

"This is a great loss to volunteer departments; they've invested a great deal of time in this person, and they're hard to replace," Rich said.

The Department of Labor says the rule that keeps firefighters from volunteering for their employers is meant to protect both parties. County Supervisors briefly addressed the speakers at the April 3 meeting, saying they'd discuss the matter with the county attorney during a closed session.

"It's not a good thing to allow our employees to volunteer," said Supervisor Ken Boyd. "It's not a new issue, and has been brought up by volunteers many times in the past."

But Crozet Fire Chief Preston Gentry said he's concerned that his department, one of the area's last all-volunteer agencies, has lost nearly a quarter of its volunteers in the past 10 years as people have increasingly turned to paid work.

"The problem we have is that we take these people in, spend all the money on getting them trained, and the next thing you know, they're getting hired by Albemarle County," said Gentry, who started as a volunteer 38 years ago. That's added to tension between careers and volunteers that has continued to simmer.

"There are some people who are career firefighters that look at it as a job and a job only, and as long as they get the paycheck they're happy," Gentry said. "When you're volunteering you do it because you want to do it, and you

take pride in your organization and your community. But once you get a career job and you get a paycheck, it becomes a business.”