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City Not Influencing Ban On Volunteer Firefighting

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A recent decision by the Jamestown Professional Firefighters Association to enforce a policy prohibiting city firefighters from volunteer firefighting is considered an "internal union matter" and isn't "something for (the city) to get in the middle of."

That's according to Mayor Sam Teresi, who said the city "would not try to influence (the decision) one way or the other."

"It's an internal union matter," he said. "The city is not really going to try to influence it one way or the other."

However, the city isn't going to oppose it, either - if our firefighters aren't getting hurt working in a volunteer capacity, from the city's standpoint that keeps our people healthier and in better condition, which costs the taxpayers less."

Teresi also said he felt it would be "inappropriate" for the city to "engage itself in internal union politics."

Lance Hedlund, the city's deputy fire chief, said the decision to prohibit city firefighters from serving as firefighters in volunteer departments "isn't a city decision."

"The city leaves it up to the individual," he said. "We do not sway them, pro or con, in their decision to join a volunteer department. The city's position is that it's up to you whether to join or not join."

Hedlund said there are 42 fire departments in Chautauqua County - 39 of which are made up entirely of volunteer firefighters and two of which use a combination of paid firefighters and volunteer firefighters. Only one county department - the city of Jamestown - is a fully paid department.

"This type of issue is disappointing to me at a time when everyone is struggling," he said. "It appears to be more divisive than productive. It's counterproductive to where the fire service needs to be. We have a good, open, working relationship with the surrounding volunteer departments, and I am disappointed the union would choose to go in this direction."

Unions in paid fire departments across the country have enacted the policy, which has been in force by the International Association of Firefighters - the parent organization of the local firefighters' union - for years. Most recently, firefighters in Albany were banned by their local union from working as volunteer firefighters. That policy, which affected about 35 firefighters there, went into effect Feb. 1.

Brian Achterberg, a city firefighter and the president of the JPFA, said the local union has had no official feedback on the matter from either firefighters or volunteer fire chiefs. Unofficially, however, he said he knows "they understand."

"We didn't talk to them specifically, but they are aware of it," he said. "The only people who will turn this into an issue are the rabblioners who have an axe to grind for whatever reason. The realistic chiefs understand. They know volunteer firefighters go to paid departments all the time and, as a result, cut back on their volunteering to give as much as they can do their full-time job."

Two different administrators of different local volunteer fire departments, who spoke to The Post-Journal on condition of anonymity, said they were confused over the union's new policy.

"The thing that makes the volunteer fire departments work so well is that everyone comes from different lines of work with different skill sets," one administrator said. "Many people choose to use their work-related skills to help their communities in their off time and the Jamestown firefighters union has decided that their members shouldn't be allowed to do that. I don't understand why. All volunteer firefighters are covered through a state insurance plan in case they get injured while working for a volunteer department."

He pointed out the city's fire department has called on or worked with volunteer departments a number of times in the past - namely the recent fire that destroyed LaScala's Restaurant, the El Greco fire on First Street and the Marlin Rockwell fire on Winsor Street.

If local volunteer departments do lose people because of the new policy, it would "hurt the department," another administrator said.

"I just question how the union can tell their members what they are allowed to do on their off time," he said. "Some of these guys do construction work and other side jobs and hobbies that could potentially

bring harm to them. It doesn't make sense that it is to ensure their safety."

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