

Donna Swanson
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I love Ashland and the people who live here and who care for each other. Unfortunately, in spite of all the beauty and goodness all around us, this is not a perfect world. The two things that frighten me the most are wildfires and the city's budget process. We have seen the tragic destruction of Paradise and the ongoing wildfire in neighboring Canada where tens of thousands are fleeing in its wake. These events are unprecedented and climate predictions indicate increased activity in the future. We must rely on wildfire fighters for protection but when the fires approach our borders it is the Ashland Fire Department that knows our city, our escape routes, our water sources, and how and where to assist us as we try to survive. Equipment, materials and supplies are as necessary as the personnel for they function as one. I understand the fire fighters will be maintained but the fire department will have to cut its budget by \$400,000 over the next two years. This is tying the hands of our fire fighters, it is telling them to do the work the Budget Committee should have done, that is to cut costs. This is not a solution that will benefit our city if the result is the inability to defend the life and property of residents, businesses, visitors and the future viability of Ashland as a cultural destination.

We have incurred a huge debt from the budget now ending. Is the answer to do it again? Has the Budget Committee turned to "slash and burn" tactics to try to bring it into line without consideration for the merit of what we are continuing to support? Do we need to pay for a public golf course for the sport of a few? Do we need to subsidize recreational programs that don't come close to breaking even? The money for economic development in the general fund should be allocated to support the fire department. We are not using funding set aside for much larger projects such as the \$25 million for a water purification plant. I am not privy to the assets and obligations of the City but it is evident that creative thinking has not been part of the budget process and it must be. The solutions seem to be to increase taxes across the board: from property taxes, to each individual service, such as water, and sewer. You have placed the burden of balancing the budget on us rather than cutting expenses.

I fail to understand how anything in Ashland can carry more importance than fire protection in today's incendiary climate in which we are struggling to survive. There is no precedence for what will happen next but studies show that fires will continue and will increase in severity. We cannot control the elements and it also appears we are unable to control the direction of our budget expenditures. The current budget up for approval tonight appears to indicate that alternatives have not been explored and evidence of creative thinking is nowhere to be found. My sincerest plea, for my sake and the sake of residents who are unaware of their tax increases and reduced fire protection, is for the Budget Committee to revisit their findings before taking a vote this evening. Thank you.

BUDGET DEFICIT

FIRE CHIEF RESIGNS TO SAVE POSITIONS

By Caitlin Fowlkes
Ashland Tidings

Ashland Fire & Rescue Chief Mike D'Orazi resigned Monday in an effort to free up enough money in the fire department budget to keep three firefighter positions proposed for cuts.

The chair of the Wildfire Safety Commission, Stephen Gagne, announced D'Orazi's resignation during the commission's annual presentation to Ashland City Council on Tuesday night.

Last week at the Citizens' Budget Committee meeting, the committee asked D'Orazi to reduce his budget by \$100,000, as opposed to raising the monthly public support fee \$5, from \$1.50 to \$6.50.

According to Ashland Firefighters Local 1269 President Brent Knutson, D'Orazi was asked later in the week by city officials whether he could find a way to cut his budget by an

additional \$300,000. During his budget presentation earlier in the year, D'Orazi had asked for additional staff and resources.

Knutson said the proposed budget cuts would require firefighter layoffs, so he decided to retire and free up his salary to help fund the positions.

His resignation was effective immediately.

The fire chief's annual salary was \$129,347, according to Ashland Human Resources Director Tina Gray.

Knutson said Deputy Fire Chief David Shepherd will assume the day-to-day operational management of the fire department until the city decides how to handle the situation. Shepherd served as interim fire chief before D'Orazi was hired in January 2018.

Gagne said the decision was difficult for D'Orazi. Knutson said the department is grateful

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AROUND TOWN

Fire chief resigns to save positions

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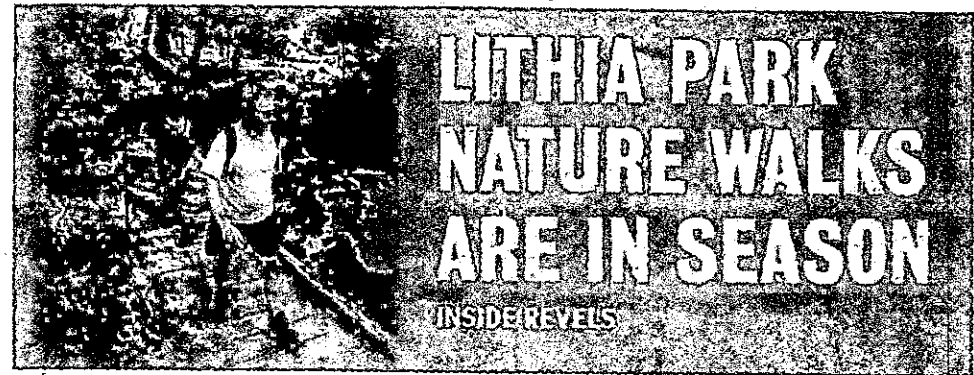


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RESIGNATION

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that he would step down from his position so others could keep their jobs.

"We commend him for taking a stand against potential firefighter layoffs," Knutson said. "It's quite the gesture, that's for sure."

The city is facing a \$2 million general fund deficit that needs to be eliminated by the end of the current biennium June 30.

The city hired three firefighters two-and-a-half years ago without a way to keep them on board long-term, Ashland Financial Director Mark Welch said in a previous interview.

Because staffing accounts for about 66% of the general fund, and the fire department budget comes out of the general fund, cuts were presented as an option to lessen the deficit in the financial director's proposal to the City Council and the Budget Committee.

Knutson said there's no guarantee the city won't still make cuts to the department.

"I'm optimistic that the Budget Committee will do the right thing and not reduce firefighter staffing while also funding the police department appropriately," Knutson said.

The last Citizens' Budget Committee meeting was scheduled for Wednesday. The committee will make

"It's very, very important that we can staff our wildland engines, because they can navigate the narrower roads. If that engine wasn't available, that severely handicaps what types of resources we can use to fight fire."

Brent Knutson, Ashland Firefighters Local 1269 President

a recommendation to the City Council, and the council is tentatively scheduled to finalize the budget by June 4, according to Knutson.

The fire department currently staffs a minimum of nine firefighters per shift between the city's two stations, with a maximum of 10. If the department budget were cut by \$100,000, Knutson said, staffing would drop to a minimum of eight per shift split between the two stations.

Station 2 staffing would be reduced by 50%, with the wildland engine and the third-out ambulance at Station 2 left without staff.

He said not having staff on the wildland engine could be detrimental to public safety if a wildfire broke out.

"It's very, very important that we can staff our wildland engines, because they can navigate the narrower roads," Knutson said. "If that engine wasn't available, that severely handicaps what types of

resources we can use to fight fire."

In addition, if \$100,000 were cut from the fire department budget, the main firehouse engine would be unstaffed about 50% of the time.

"Which is critical, because 40% of our calls are from Station 2, and 42% of the time we have multiple calls going out at the same time, and it would severely reduce our ability to meet emergency demand," Knutson said.

He said there was no way to cut \$400,000 from the budget without eliminating positions.

"The more people you have, the more people that can extinguish the fires," Knutson said. "That's why staffing is so important and why firefighters are so important."

He said the wildfire season this summer has the potential to be a bad one based on the number of grass fires that have already ignited this year in the valley.

"We've had quite a lot of grass fires in the beginning of May, which is unusual for this time of year," Knutson said. "It's concerning that's started already."

Prior to his announcement of D'Orazi's resignation, Gagne suggested the city fund all of the resources the fire department had requested, including a combination engine and ladder fire truck, a fire inspector position and a simulation table.

He said he understands that in the face of the deficit, requesting expensive

equipment and an additional position is "ill advised at best," but it's necessary because of "the reality of Ashland's increasing risk of a large-scale fire."

He emphasized his point with statistics from the Camp fire, which destroyed the town of Paradise, California, which had roughly 5,000 more residents than Ashland, according to the 2017 U.S. Census.

Six months after the devastating fire, only 6% of toxic debris has been hauled away, and the town is looking at an estimated cleanup cost of \$2 billion, he said, adding that the city's water supply had been contaminated by cancer-causing compounds.

"We hope you'll agree that it just does not make any sense to wait until after we've experienced a significant urban fire before we make sure Ashland has what it needs to be properly prepared, and start lowering our risk in significant ways," Gagne said.

D'Orazi came out of retirement in Northern California to take the Ashland fire chief job in January 2018. He started as a firefighter in 1979.

Knutson said D'Orazi plans to stay local for the next few months at least, adding that D'Orazi did not wish to comment until the budget is finalized.

Ashland Fire & Rescue covers roughly 6.52 square miles, and provides medical transport services to roughly 650 square miles spanning from the California border to Phoenix.