

Kingston alderman wants to shrink fire department, limit its duties
By Paul Kirby, Freeman staff
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KINGSTON - A city alderman who is running for the Common Council presidency says the city should offer early retirement incentives to eligible firefighters and eliminate the positions of those who accept.

Leonard Walker, a Ward 3 Democrat who plans to seek both the Republican and Democratic nominations for alderman-at-large, stopped short of proposing layoffs in the department but suggested the city close one of its three paid fire stations and stop the practice of responding to routine medical calls.

His proposals met with fierce objections by Fire Chief Richard Salzmann, who said the city would pay with lost lives.

"It would be devastating to the department and to the city," Salzmann said.

Walker does not believe his idea would jeopardize lives, and he said it would save thousands in taxpayer dollars. He said city leaders are living in the past and city taxpayers, given the lack of good-paying jobs, can no longer afford some municipal services.

"When IBM was here, we got used to eating steaks and lobster and not really caring about the bill," Walker said. "Now we don't have that luxury and we have to look for ways to save."

Common Council Minority Leader Richard Cahill, R-Ward 6, who is running for mayor with Walker as his running mate, said he does not support most of Walker's plan. Cahill said he didn't mind the early retirement incentive program but would replace those firefighters who choose to leave.

Cahill outright rejected Walker's proposals to take away emergency response responsibilities or close a firehouse. But he said Walker is making a sincere attempt to save money.

Walker said firefighters who are eligible to retire should be offered an early incentive to do so. And once those firefighters leave, they should not be replaced, he said.

He said emergency service calls should be left to Mobile Life Paramedic Service, the private company that provides ambulance services to the city. He argued that having both city emergency medical technicians and ambulance paramedics responding to medical calls is "a duplication of service."

He did not say which of the city's three staffed firehouses should be closed.

Salzmann said 16 members of the department are eligible to retire, including seven top brass. At present, he said, there are 63 sworn paid firefighters, down from 79 in the late 1970s.

Under Walker's plan, Salzmann said, firefighter response time would grow to longer than the current three minutes, there would not be enough firefighters as required by federal and state law to respond to fires, and residents would not get the fast and efficient service they now receive for medical calls.

Salzmann said Walker's plan is simply dangerous.

"We provide an essential service that I have never had one complaint about," he said.

Alderman-at-Large James Noble, a Democrat, said Walker's plan would diminish a quality service that Kingston residents deserve and that others, who are thinking about moving to the city, find impressive.

Walker has filed to change his party enrollment from Democrat to Republican. The change will take effect after the November election.