Commission Workshop

April 2, 2019

5:30 pm

Mayor Nugent called the workshop to order at 5:30 pm.

Members present included Mayor Daniel W. Nugent, Commissioner Tommy Chastain, Commissioner Janice D. Mortimer, Commissioner Shannon Smith and Commissioner Wilbur Waters. Also present were City Manager Bob Milner, City Attorney Dan Sikes, Deputy Clerk Lisa Terry, City Clerk Ricky Thompson and Fire Chief Gary Wise.

Attorney Sikes said the firefighter’s requested a workshop with the commissioners. He said the commissioners can ask questions but he cautioned them about opining the position of the commission.

Mr. Milner said the contract with the firefighter’s union expired in October 1, 2018. He said changes to the contract will be retroactive to that date. Mr. Milner introduced Greg Starling the President of the Firefighter’s Local 3120 Union. Mr. Starling said he is the Engineer at the Starke Fire Department. He has 20-years-experience as a firefighter 17 years of which is with the City of Starke. Mr. Starling expressed appreciation for the opportunity to speak to the commission. He asked the commissioners to stop him at anytime with questions. Mr. Starling said this is the first time in 18 years the firefighters have addressed the commission and last time they had a signed contract within 2 weeks. He passed out a handout titled The Professional Firefighters of Starke. Mr. Starling said the 2 things he wants to talk about tonight are the starting salaries of the firefighters and their retirement. He said general employees work 80 hours bi-weekly or 2080 hours per year. Firefighters work 24-hours on and 48-hours off or 2920 hours per year which is 840 hours more than general employees. Mr. Starling said the next 2 pages of the handout show the starting salaries of employees for the last 5 years and current salaries. He asked the commissioners to look over it. Mr. Starling said for years the starting salary for a firefighter was minimum wage. He said that changed roughly 10 years ago when the city adopted a minimum wage of $8 per hour. Mr. Starling said a few years later the city minimum wage was raised to $9 per hour. He said in 2017 the minimum wage for a firefighter increased to $10 per hour. Mr. Starling said a common theme has been you can’t do for 1 what you don’t do for another. He challenged the commissioners to find an employee who makes less than a firefighter. Mr. Starling said some employees make $16 to $18 per hour which is more than firefighters who have worked for the city for 18 years. He said an Inmate Crew Leader who has worked for the city for just over a year started at $12 per hour and now makes $16 per hour which is more than every fire department employee except the top 2 guys. Commissioner Smith asked if new firefighters are required to have training. Mr. Starling said they have to have their Fire Standards and their EMT Standards. Commissioner Mortimer asked if PT beside the firefighters’ names meant part-time. Mr. Starling said yes. Commissioner Mortimer asked if the part-time firefighters have other jobs because they certainly cannot sustain a family on what they are making with the city. Mr. Starling said the city is fortunate to get part-time firefighters who have full-time jobs in surrounding counties. He said part-time firefighters start at $9 per hour and full-time starts at $10. Commissioner Mortimer said there are no full-time firefighters on the handout. Chief Wise said this is only for the last 5 years and they have only hired 1 full-time firefighter in the last 5 years. Mr. Starling said the firefighters are unique because the commissioners set their pay. He said the next 2 pages shows the average starting salary for the rest of the departments within the city. He asked the commissioners to look over it. Mr. Starling said it is frustrating to see these salaries because they have been told you can’t do for them what you don’t do for everyone else and this proves they have been doing for everyone else. Mayor Nugent asked what happens when a firefighter promotes to driver. Mr. Starling said you have to be on the force for 5 years before you can be a driver and you get a 10 percent pay increase. Chief Wise said it also takes a state certification to obtain that position. Mr. Starling said the commissioners are the only ones who can change the firefighters pay to bring them in line with other city employees. He said the next page is a breakdown of the firefighters work schedule. Mr. Starling said firefighters work in 6-week cycles. The first 2 weeks the firefighter works 120 hours. The second 2 weeks the firefighter works 120 hours. The third 2 weeks the firefighter works 96 hours. Mr. Starling explained Garcia Time. He said the first and second 2-week period the firefighter is paid 106 hours at straight time and 14 hours at Garcia Time or time and a half. The third 2-week period they get 96 hours at straight time. Mr. Starling said the retirement benefit is calculated using only the straight time worked so the first and second 2-week period the firefighter is losing 14 hour each period in retirement benefits. He said he cannot find another fire department in the State of Florida that calculates the retirement benefit the way the City of Starke does. Every other fire department calculates the retirement benefit based on the number of hours worked or W-2 earnings. Mr. Starling said he does not have a choice in the hours he works but the commission has a choice in whether or not he gets paid for the hours he works in retirement. Commissioner Smith asked Mr. Starling to explain Garcia Time. Mr. Starling said once he goes over 106 hours worked in 2 weeks he is paid at time and a half but it is not overtime because it is part of the work schedule. He said the commission decides whether the firefighters get paid at time and a half after 40 hour, 53 hours or 56 hours. Mr. Starling said if a firefighter takes a day off during a 2-week period he loses the Garcia Time. He asked the commissioners to turn to the next page. Mr. Starling said a firefighter works a 120-hour schedule 17 times a year which comes out to $21,590 for a firefighter making $10 per hour. The firefighter works a 96-hour schedule 9 times a year which comes out to $8,640 for a firefighter making $10 per hour for a total of $30,230 per year if the firefighter does not take anytime off. Mr. Starling said the retirement calculation goes from $21,590 for the 120-hour periods to $18,020 so the firefighter loses $3,570 in retirement benefits. Mayor Nugent asked what the retirement multiplier is. Mr. Starling said 3.5 percent. Mr. Starling asked the commissioners to turn to the next page. He said the old multiplier for general employees was 2.5 percent. The new multiplier for general employees is 1.6 percent. Mr. Starling said that system was adopted in 2012. He said the Police Department has a retirement multiplier of 3.75 percent but they contribute 1 percent while the fire department contributes 5 percent. Commissioner Chastain asked if that is because of the amount of funding the Police Department Pension has. Mr. Starling said he has no idea. He said prior to 2012 the firefighters were the only employees who contributed to their pension. Mr. Starling asked the commissioners to turn to the next page. He said it is unclear how long the fire department contributed 1 percent to their retirement. Mr. Starling said in 2003 the firefighter’s contribution went from 1 percent to 5 percent. He said the only way to fix this issue is if the commissioners decide to fix it. Mr. Starling said in the past they have had studies done at Commissioner Chastain’s request. He said the first study indicated that the city would have to pay in an additional $25,000 and the firefighter would have to pay in 5 percent on the 14 hours. Mr. Starling said 2 years later they had the same study done and it went from $25,000 to $20,000. He said the 2 studies cost more than it would have cost to implement this. Commissioner Smith asked if that was based on Garcia Time. Mr. Starling said it was based on required work hours. He asked if there were any questions. The commission had none. Mr. Starling said he can’t stress enough how long this has been put off and the only ones who can fix it is the commissioners. Commissioner Chastain said all the other fire departments are members of the State of Florida retirement system. Chief Wise said Gainesville, Jacksonville and Tampa have their own retirement systems. Commissioner Chastain said they are all big cities. Mr. Starling said most of the cities have their own retirement systems but every county fire department that he knows of is in the state retirement system. He said no one will be retiring from the fire department for 10 years so the retirement plan has plenty of time to grow. Commissioner Waters said he appreciates the firefighters. He said he will look at this very closely. Mr. Starling said the firefighters are asking for a starting pay of $13 per hour. He said the level of training for a starting firefighter is higher than any other starting employee. Mr. Milner asked Mr. Starling how he wants to move forward. Mr. Starling said he wants the commissioners to look at the original contract that was submitted a year ago. Mayor Nugent thanked the firefighters for attending the workshop.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 6:07 pm.