

June 19, 2023

Sebastopol City Council Members,

I am submitting this letter to each of you requesting that you reinstate the \$80K Retention/Incentive Benefit that has been cut from the Fire Department Budget in the draft 2023/24 Sebastopol City Budget.

FEMA recognized the value of volunteer departments for small communities like Sebastopol, and for that reason it set up the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response [SAFER] Grant program in 2005 which included money as an incentive to retain volunteer firefighters. Former Chief John Zanzi obtained two successive SAFER grants with the understanding that the City of Sebastopol would assume the program in 2015 which it did.

The Retention/Incentive Benefit has been an approved City Budget item annually since 2015. All the prior City Councils recognized the value of a fire department staffed by volunteers. You can do the math; the Sebastopol Fire Department, comprised of well-trained volunteers who are paid stipends and an incentive payment rather than a salary or benefits, is the most cost-effective delivery of high-quality fire service. Furthermore, I would point out that the members of the Department are committed volunteers who willingly respond to calls day or night. Their commitment assures that you, the elected leaders of the City, meet your fiduciary duty to provide adequate first responder services to Sebastopol citizens.

Volunteerism has been the organizational structure of the Sebastopol Fire Department since 1902. It is a special tradition which current and past members embrace with pride. I personally can attest to this. I joined this department in 2001 when I was 58, serving as an active firefighter for almost 16 years before moving to reserve status over 6 years ago. My service pales compared to many others in the department who have served as committed volunteers for 30 years or more, responding to calls day and night even while holding down daytime jobs.

Yes, as volunteers we are paid a \$15 stipend for each call to which we respond plus each Thursday night training sessions that we attend, up to 50 a year. The incentive pay instituted by the City Council seven years ago was an acknowledgment as to the value of the volunteers for their service to the community. Incidentally, we currently have 10 probationary firefighters, most of whom have joined the department since November 2023. The incentive payments will be especially important to all these young firefighters as encouragement to continue the volunteer tradition started in this department over 120 years ago.

As council members, you have been elected the political leaders of the City of Sebastopol. The operative word in "leaders" is LEAD. So, I have a challenge for each of you to consider: commit to carry a fire department issued pager and respond to the fire house for every call that occurs when you are in Sebastopol, especially the night calls, for 14 consecutive days and nights.

As political leaders in this community, a commitment to respond to calls will give you the opportunity to experience exactly what our active volunteers have committed to on behalf of the Sebastopol community. I will contact each of you by email no later than June 22nd, asking if you are willing to make a 14 consecutive day commitment sometime during the next 60 days. Upon commitment you will be issued a pager linked to REDCOM, which is the body that tones out the request for Sebastopol Fire

Department services. If you respond quickly enough to the fire house, you may have an opportunity to ride on the engine to the call, which will allow you to observe how the volunteer firefighters perform.

My hope is that all five of you accept the challenge. It could be very tiring if you have several night calls and then proceed to your work place during the day. However, it will give you an insight as to what the volunteer firefighters have experienced over their many years of service. It will validate why the past City Councils always included incentive benefits in the annual budgets without reservation.

In closing, I reaffirm my request that you reinsert the Retention/Incentive Benefit into the draft 2023/24 budget that you will approve later tonight. How you respond to my request for reinstatement of the Retention/Incentive Benefit will tell me much about your loyalty to the Sebastopol Fire Department and the individuals who volunteer their time and energy every day of the year serving the residents of Sebastopol.

Thank you for your consideration.

Joe Pogar
Reserve Sebastopol Fire Fighter
[REDACTED]
Sebastopol