

## **Dumas backs ordinance with requirement for firefighter hires**

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ATTLEBORO - Mayor Kevin Dumas jumped into a council hot spot this week, saying he supports a proposed ordinance that would mandate the hiring of firefighters who are also paramedics.

It's important to guarantee that what's now merely a policy of his administration will continue into the future until all firefighters are paramedics, he said. Approximately 25 out of 73 firefighters are paramedics, so the city's goal won't be achieved for many years, but the effort needs to be sustained through the eventual change in administrations, he said.

"It won't happen 'til I'm long gone," he said of a fire department fully staffed by paramedics. "But hiring paramedics should continue no matter who is in this office. I think it should be formally established."

In the meantime, Dumas said it's his intent to continue hiring only firefighters who are paramedics no matter what councilors eventually do with the proposed ordinance.

"Whatever the city council decides, I will hire only paramedics," he said. The proposal, brought in by Councilor Bill Bowles and co-sponsored by Councilors George Ross, Walter Thibodeau and former Councilor Robert Schoch, touched off a mini-firestorm in recent weeks, with Councilor Peter Blais arguing that a requirement to hire paramedics would make it more difficult to hire the offspring of current firefighters. It also sparked a move for a residency requirement from Blais.

Dumas said the city needs to keep hiring paramedics not only because the majority of fire department calls are medical, but also to maintain a state waiver that allows it to operate an advanced life support ambulance with only one paramedic instead of two. Under the waiver, a paramedic can be accompanied by an emergency medical technician instead of a second paramedic.

The waiver is crucial to keeping two ALS ambulances on the road, Dumas said.

The waiver could be revoked if the city falters in its policy.

Meanwhile the mayor argued against a strict residency requirement, but said it would not be unreasonable to set a mileage requirement.

"I think it should be debated by the council. It's a legitimate issue," he said. "If you have people living two hours away, it would create a problem if we needed to get them here fast."

Dumas believes, however, that a strict city-only residency requirement would shrink the

pool of qualified job applicants.

In a related matter, Dumas said the city did not get a grant it applied for from the Department of Homeland Security last summer.

The grant would have paid about half the salaries of four firefighters for four years.

At the time, city officials, including Dumas, told the council that the grant could not be used to hire paramedics, which led some people to complain off the record that Dumas was renegeing on his paramedic-only policy. Clarification obtained from the DHS and provided to The Sun Chronicle by a resident show that paramedics could have been hired if they were also firefighters. However the DHS letter also says the primary goal of the grant is to hire "frontline firefighters."

Dumas and Councilor Kim Allard said last summer any firefighter hired under the grant would be required to become a paramedic.

The mayor denied suggestions that the goal of the grant application was to avoid hiring paramedics so non-medically trained offspring of firefighters could be hired instead.

The grant language focused on hiring firefighters, not paramedics, and the city decision to seek the grant was intended to expand the fire department with a minimal financial impact to the city, Dumas said.

"It was a way to get federal money to cover a major portion of their salaries for four years," Dumas said. "I wouldn't apply for a federal grant just to put certain people on the fire department."