

## Ideologues in Huntington Beach Reject Pension Savings, Opt for Fire Department Cuts

by: OC Progressive

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*A periodic update on the Republican war against public employees in the OC*

Is Huntington Beach following the Costa Mesa train to Crazy Town, opting for confrontation instead of common sense with their employees?

On Monday, May 2nd, the Huntington Beach City Council, in closed session, voted against a proposal that would increase almost \$1.3 million in pension costs over the next two years and would also create a second pension tier for future safety employees.

On May 3rd, Council Member Devin Dwyer was telling city employees that if they hadn't been there very long, they were looking for another job. He also said that negotiations with the Fire Association had broken down, only to be quickly resolved by a representative of that group, who expressed an interest in continuing to talk.

Welcome to the wonderful world of Orange County right wing politics, where ambitious young pols like Don Hanser and Tom Harper seem poised to try to get some of the publicity that Jim Righeimer has been garnering in Costa Mesa. Tom has run up an Assembly, State Senate and County Supervisor seat, and the players want to be seen as pension fighters and reformers to appeal to the hard core of Republican primary voters.



*Pictured is the Women's Club Fire one of four major fires among a total of 36 fire calls in Huntington Beach in April. In the next two weeks, Huntington Beach also had a fatal fire, a fire where 2 victims were rescued with a ladder from a second story and a multi-million dollar home fire.*

As Mayor Pro Tem Don Hansen said on his Facebook page during the election,

*"Let's take our city back! If you see a police car or fire truck on the mail - that's code for "union owned" We advocates not union puppets now more than ever!"*

Mailers supporting Hansen's endorsed candidates echoed the attacks on public safety employees and particularly

After three months of bargaining, the Huntington Beach Fire Association thought they had a deal that would save Huntington Beach \$640,000 a year over each of the next two years. The proposed [side letter](#) to their existing agreement would change the retirement formula for new hires to lower pension costs in the future. After three months of negotiations with the Fire Association President Darrin Witt felt that *"we had met all of the Council's goals set out in the strategic planning since the beginning of the year."*

Instead of taking two scheduled raises, one of which had already been postponed for 18 months, sworn fire officers

that money to their pensions, increasing their pension contribution from 2.25% of their income to 6.75% of their income.

In return, the Firefighters asked for guaranteed staffing levels so that they wouldn't have to cut the number of paramedic engine companies that were available to respond to emergencies.

As the Council kept moving the goalposts, the paramedics and fire fighters included a budget trigger which would guarantee staffing levels if revenues drop, expenses rise unexpectedly, or if CalPERS increases pension rates.

Monday, May 2, in closed session, the Huntington Beach City Council voted against the savings, moving instead to further service cuts that would increase response times. Cutting the budget could mean service cuts that might include eight paramedic engines or one of the two ladder trucks. Budget cuts could also reduce availability of one of the city's staffed specialized engines. Do you cut one of the paramedic engines which respond to over 12,000 9-1-1 Medical calls or partially idle one of the two ladder trucks which have the ability to put firemen at roof level for the 375 structures and which also carry additional equipment like the "Jaws of Life"?

Even without more personnel cuts to HB Fire, the annexation of Sunset Beach, coupled with fewer available units in surrounding cities, will put pressure on response times in Huntington Beach. The Fire Department has already laid off time employees, including a Battalion Chief, after the City's revenues dropped substantially during the Great Recession.

In neighboring Costa Mesa, it is Mayor Pro Tem [Jim Righeimer](#) who pushes the party line, with staunch ideology at his side, and a bumbling, ineffectual Mayor following along. Their hasty decision to issue layoffs to half the City's police officers has made Costa Mesa a laboratory for right wing political experiments in California, with clear results as the continued exodus of police officers, firefighters and [management](#) is crippling the City.

In HB, it's Mayor Pro Tem Don Hansen calling the shots, with Republican Central Committee member Matt Harper and Central Committee member Devin Dwyer as comrades. All three are close allies of party boss Scott Baugh, a local perennial meddler in Surf City politics. [Joe Carchio](#) plays the role of bumbling, ineffectual Mayor, whose deal to buy the city a year ahead of schedule has been repeatedly questioned.



left to right, Mayor Pro Tem Don Hansen, Council Members Matt Harper and Devin Dwyer

Don Hansen, his Red County buddy [Chip Hanlon](#), and their Tea Party allies were big losers in the 2010 election. Hansen candidates who paid Hansen's wife's consulting business, [Red Zone Strategies](#), lost in the 2010 election. an initiative which would have shifted money away from public safety, also lost decisively.

Hansen, Harper, and Dwyer are seen as the core who have walked away from the deal that would reduce the City's future pension costs, forcing service cuts instead of compromise.

Council Member Joe Shaw, elected in 2010 without support from the fire union, refused to comment on what happened in a closed session, but indicated that he strongly supported the recommendations which the City received from their consultant, John Bartel.

"We hired an expert who recommended that we work towards a second, lower pension tier for all new hires by getting employees to pick up a greater share of their pensions while holding salaries down. That is exactly what the Association proposed, and it could have been a model for our negotiations with all of our employees."

The public needs to see this choice debated in public, not hidden behind closed doors. Writing at [Chip Hanlon's](#) [Blog](#) Don Hansen seemed to agree [as he expressed his love for country music](#)

One effective strategy is to adopt a set of financial policies that are debated publicly. These policies are set during labor negotiations prior to commencement. For example, you could adopt a policy that says "The goal of our negotiations will be to increase the employee's contribution to pension costs." In Huntington Beach, we recently gave direction on the elimination of pending salary increases by the end of February. By taking a public vote in a meeting called by the union leaders, it sends a signal that there is a solid vote for such a solution.

By setting a more transparent policy goal prior to the commencement of labor negotiations, elected officials are held accountable to the ultimate result. Further, if your community leaders are not committed to fiscally sustainable solutions, their position will be publicly vetted as well. The economic consequences of these decisions are too great to keep hidden.

Because no one knows what goes on behind closed doors.

There are three simple questions for the Council Members who rejected the Fire Department's concessions.

What policy are you advancing by refusing exactly the type of pension reform that your own expert recommended?

When are you going to have the public debate on whether the residents and businesses in Huntington Beach are willing to sacrifice response times for your ideology?

Are you looking for sustainable budget solutions or just pandering to Republican primary voters so you can get the attention that Jim Righeimer has been hogging?

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