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Firefighters get hot about talk of smoking ban

Firefighters may have to fight for the chance to smoke.

Firefighters would rather fight than quit.

Several firefighters and fire officials say a suggested ban on smoking by firemen faces stiff opposition. They also say such a rule would be unenforceable.

Dr. Robert Mahaffey made the suggestion Monday at the first meeting of the firefighters health and safety committee, a body created by the recently approved contract between the city and the firefighters' union.

"We're kicking it around," said Police and Fire Commissioner Roy Gardner.

Tom Baker, Local 176 president, said smoking is a "personal and moral" issue that should not be legislated.

"I hope we try to approach it from a more positive position," Baker said. He favors educational programs on the effects of smoking rather than regulating the habit, he said.

MAHAFFEY, who has a contract with the city from the University of Oklahoma Family Practice Department, said the combination of smoking cigarettes and inhaling smoke at fires expose firefighters to a great risk of lung disease.

Some of the chronic lung cases are due to "burning tobacco rather than to burning buildings," he said.

Mahaffey said he recommends a no-smoking requirement for new hires and eventually a ban on smoking for all firefighters.

There were 58 compensation cases for lung disability last year totaling \$846,692 in payments, said Richard Bingham, city loss control manager. All were firefighter cases, he said.

Compensation claims for all firefighter injuries totaled \$1.5 million.

Fire Marshal David Kimball said regulations could restrict where smoking is allowed but said it would be difficult to require someone to quit smoking.

A ban would not be enforceable, he said.

OTHER FIRE personnel said a smoking ban would cross the line into regulation of personal habits and would unfairly single out firefighters.

Gardner said he would "give some serious consideration to hire only people who don't smoke."

Even that regulation seems difficult to enforce since the department would have to take the prospective employee's word on the matter, Gardner said.

It makes sense to single out firefighters among city employees because they are the ones exposed to toxic smoke inhalation on the job, he said.

Gardner suggested contacting other cities with similar bans to investigate enforcement problems and effects on firefighter health.

Wichita and Alexandria, Va., do not hire firefighters who smoke, fire officials said.

The committee also set Oct. 15 as the start of the firefighter physical fitness program.

THE PURPOSE of the program, in the works for several years, is to reduce sick and injury leave, and control the number of injury compensation cases by keeping firefighters in shape.

Committee members are Gardner, Baker, Mahaffey, Bingham, Mayor Terry Young, Fire Chief Stanley Hawkins, Personnel Director Preston Whitson and Mike Linville, fire department loss control analyst.

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