

Detroit-area community issues layoff notices to entire fire department

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The Detroit-area community of Allen Park has issued layoff notices to all 25 of its firefighters due to a budget shortfall of \$663,000. At a packed city council meeting on February 22, the motion to send out the pink slips was passed over objections from many angry citizens.

The layoff notices had been looming for some time. Allen Park, which is home to 28,000 people, had been counting on revenues from a new film studio to cover shortfalls in traffic citation revenues and ambulance payments. When the hoped for windfall from a contract with Unity Studios ended in a lease dispute, the city council proposed axing the fire department.

Angry residents condemned the proposal at the February council meeting, citing the critical need for emergency and rescue operations. As poverty grows, unsafe housing conditions spread, and utility shutoffs reach epidemic proportions in the Detroit area, the need for firefighting services increases. The Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) has established that in 2010, 12 to 14 people died in the Detroit metropolitan area as the result of house fires caused because they were unable to afford to safely heat and light their homes.

Despite the community's protests, Allen Park council members insisted that they had no choice.

Firefighters later told local news reporters that they were "in shock" over the layoff notices. Last August, the union negotiated a contract with the city that included \$800,000 in concessions over a three-year period. Employees had believed that in making the givebacks they had done their part to guarantee their jobs.

Fire Chief Douglas LaFond told Fox News, "I think it's crazy. How can you eliminate the fire department

from the whole city? Especially when we do such an excellent job. I don't think they're being treated fairly and I think they need to put some more thought into it."

Sergeant Jeff O'Riley added, "It's a very scary thing that the city came up with this plan. Not just for us, but for the citizens of Allen Park. There have been some rumors of other cities taking over [fire protection services for residents]. I do know for a fact that the other cities are overtaxed as it is with their layoffs and their concessions."

"Everything is on the table," said Todd Flood, an attorney for the city of Allen Park, who is pushing for more concessions from firefighters and in turn, other city workers.

Allen Park is surrounded by communities also facing large budget deficits. Undoubtedly, other local politicians are looking upon the measures taken there as a possible solution for their own cities..

In the news media, there has been much talk about the failed venture with the Hollywood film studio, which has been identified as the immediate source of the city's financial problem. And while this played a role in Allen Park's crisis, the fact that the lives of 28,000 people can be put in danger for the measly sum of \$663,000 is an indictment of the economic policies of the entire state, and the country as a whole.

The disaster facing this small Detroit-area community is being repeated in municipality after municipality across Michigan and the US. Basic public services and essential infrastructure are being hammered away at under the guise that there is "no money" to provide for the needs of ordinary people. This is a lie.

In Michigan alone, the total net worth of the state's 10 wealthiest individuals amounts to \$25 billion—far in excess of the budgetary crisis facing the entire state and its largest city, Detroit, much less the small

municipality of Allen Park. That such volumes of wealth are defended while masses of people confront layoffs and collapsing communities is an indictment of a society that places the right to profit above social need.

Working people of Allen Park and the entire Detroit area, outraged over the axing of this community's fire department and the endless impositions of cuts to social programs and public services should join the March 12 demonstration sponsored by the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs at 2 p.m. at 8011 Dexter Avenue in Detroit.



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