

The Mayor and Council of the City of Abbeville met for a committee meeting on January 22, 2019 at 5:30 P.M., at the regular meeting place, the Council Meeting Room located at 101 North State Street, with the Honorable Mark Piazza, Mayor presiding.

Members Present: Council Members Francis Plaisance, Terry Broussard, Brady Broussard, Jr., Francis Touchet, Jr., Mayor Pro-Tem and Roslyn White

Members Absent: None

Also Present: Ike Funderburk, City Attorney  
Jude Mire, Fire Chief  
Bill Spearman, Police Chief  
Steve Moosa, CPA  
Stewart Head, Electrical Superintendent  
Larry Moore, Jr., Water Department Superintendent  
Richard Sysak, Street Construction Department Superintendent  
Roger Fontenot, Water Plant Superintendent  
Kelly Mire, Assistant Fire Chief  
Jonathan Touchet, Police Department Lieutenant

*Mayor Piazza stated we are here for a Committee meeting. The committee is the Public Safety Committee chaired by Councilman Francis Plaisance. He turned the floor over to Councilman Plaisance.*

*Councilman Plaisance stated that tonight we will address an issue that we have been discussing for a long time. This committee was formed by the Mayor and he met three times with the Police Department and Fire Department. Tonight, we want to make sure everyone on the Council gets to hear and see what was discussed as far as raises. When we talked about this, we were also willing to include Municipal Employees. At this time, he would like to begin with Chief Spearman.*

*Chief Spearman stated his need is justified in trying to keep quality people here and trying to hire quality people so that we don't have to spend as much on overtime. In 4 years, we have lost 37 officers at a cost of \$200,000 to train. He put Lieutenant Jonathan Touchet in charge and he surveyed 29 agencies in the State with plus or minus 5,000 people. Out of those 29 agencies, the Abbeville Police Department, is the lowest paid department. When you look at the numbers it is from \$200 to several hundred dollars that these agencies pay that these guys are leaving for. Every agency we asked had benefits. They give their officers benefits along with their salary and overtime. The only thing they were not forthcoming in giving us is the amount of their overtime. We had a lot of trouble getting that. Lieutenant Touchet stated the starting salary of our officers is \$20,150 (this does not include State supplemental pay of \$500 per month). That is at the federal poverty level for a household of 3. An increase in pay is imperative for the members of the Abbeville Police Department. Unless the officers are getting at least a comparable salary, the department will continue to be a revolving door. The officers will continue to start their career in our department, get trained and then move on to a department which will compensate them better. The citizens deserve a department that is adequately staffed and a department that is staffed with personnel that will take time to know the City and its people. Officers who are more experienced in the department make better police officers. An officer that gets to know the people that they serve makes for better relationships, a better officer, and a safer community. The citizens deserve a safer City. We have 38 positions available right now and 32 are filled. We have 6 vacancies. Out of the 37 officers who have left us in the past 4 years, Abbeville has paid for 32 of these officers to attend the Police Academy. The cost to train a new officer is about \$5,917.99. The Abbeville Police Department had 9,392 calls last year. 529 of those calls were not police related. This is assisting other agencies. Our City needs every single department that it has and we need to work together to make it successful. No department is more important than the other. In his data collection he also provided a salary breakdown of each officer including their 4 hours overtime.*

*Councilman Touchet stated we have two factors that we have to take into consideration. You have to look at the population and the budget. They have to work with the proximity of what you are dealing with. For example, Youngsville is taking our officers. We have to have apples to apples where we can look at population, what their budget looks like and also the proximity of what we are dealing with. People can live here and drive there. Lieutenant Touchet stated he tried to show that in his data. Councilman Touchet stated he looked at Crowley, Youngsville, Morgan City, Jennings and Eunice. When you look at those six, you guys are right when you look at the starting salary here compared to those. You are talking about a \$300 to \$400 difference.*

*Councilman Broussard stated he hopes each department looks at total compensation including benefits. For instance, employees are getting \$1,000 or more each month with a family on the City health plan. That does not buy you milk and eggs but it buys you the security to sleep well at night. When we look at the whole picture, we want to look at the benefit package too. Although, we clearly understand that doesn't pay rent and groceries.*

*Councilman Touchet added that he agrees with Councilman Broussard that you have to look at that benefit. We have the best insurance around. Where is the comparison by rank in those 6 municipalities he discussed earlier? What is the Chief, Lieutenant and Sergeant making in those 6 places? We need this so we can make a thorough analysis of what that looks like. Our starting police officers need to be paid more money. That is where the negotiations have to take place.*

*Councilman Plaisance stated there is no money in the budget for this at this time so we will look at options and discuss issues here tonight. He thanked Steve Moosa who is here tonight.*

*Councilwoman Broussard stated that she understands that this has been going on for about 2 years. She would like to say to the Mayor and Council members that we need to work together to do what we have to do for each employee. She is sick and tired of us losing policemen. We train them and then they leave. She has a district that needs attention. We have other employees in other departments that are bringing low wages home. We have some employees that have dedicated their lives on their job so we need to consider them too. As a Council we need to come to an agreement and understanding to do what is best for each and every employee.*

*Mayor Mark Piazza stated that the problem is and has been for several years that we have been talking about the issue of how we would distribute a raise if a raise was going to be given. There is money in the budget for raises and it is the annual 2% raises that we have given every year to all Firemen and Policemen as well as the \$.50 per hour increase for Municipal Employees. That is in the budget and has been year in and year out. Where we run into some issues is when we try to make these comparisons with base pay which does include their years of longevity. So, when you look at a number that is base pay, it is not really what they are making. You have to include overtime and the way that we pay overtime including supplemental pay, etc. You have some sergeants and lieutenants that are pretty well paid. They make pretty good money. Your average lieutenant, with supplemental pay, is averaging about \$65,000 per year. We have the same issue in the Fire Department. We are top heavy. We know where the problem is. It is with starting pay. The employees that we have lost, except for 2 sergeants (and one came back), have all been patrolmen. Our issue is at the bottom. His question to Ike is that we are kind of handcuffed with some State laws here as to how we can distribute pay raises if one is to be given. The big burning question, in everybody's mind is, can you give an across the board pay raise to Fire and Police?*

*Mr. Funderburk stated we will take Police first. 33:2212F is the provision that singles out the City of Abbeville to be treated differently from any other City in the State of Louisiana with a 12,000 population or more. It states that an entry level gets base pay and then there are incremental increases for Officer First Class, Sergeant and Lieutenant. It goes up in increments of 15% for the Officer First Class, 25% for a Sergeant and 50% for a Lieutenant. So, if we give a \$100 raise to the entry level officer, the State statute requires us to give \$150 raise to the Lieutenant, \$125 raise to the Sergeant and \$115 raise to the Officer First Class. The statute is almost a mirror image of the Fire Department pay structure that is for all departments with a population of 12,000 and over. It is a problem and he and Bill have spoken about the statute on many occasions. The Police Chief has requested an opinion from the Attorney General.*

*Mayor Piazza asked Chief Spearman what is he asking for? Chief Spearman stated he is asking for across the board raises. Mr. Funderburk stated by that, this would mean every officer in the department would get the same amount. There would not be steps. This is obviously contrary to what State law is. So, we need to find a work around that or get Abbeville treated like every other municipality in the same class and not have the step increases perpetuated into the future.*

*Councilman Touchet asked Chief Spearman that he understand he wants an across the board raise but if there are any employee or a group of employees that goes and says that is not what they agreed upon. Chief Spearman stated he has not heard that from any employee. Councilman Touchet stated to Chief Spearman that what Chief is saying is that everyone of your 30+ officers are ok with an across the board raise. Chief Spearman answered yes, they have discussed this a lot. Councilman Touchet stated that goes a long way. We can't be fighting amongst ourselves or having somebody come through the back door and something happens. Chief Spearman stated they all agree where the problem is that the officers that stay here for 25 or 30 years feel that they should get something too. Councilman Touchet stated they will get something because "across the board" means everybody will get something. Chief Spearman stated we have discussed this option (across the board) and as far as he knows, everybody is on board with it. He has not heard any negative discussion about it. Councilman Plaisance asked if Chief Spearman has polled every officer. Chief Spearman stated he has polled the echelon in sergeant and lieutenants' meetings.*

*Mayor Piazza asked Chief Mire what his department feels about an across the board pay raise. Chief Mire stated his guys have no problem with that. His salary structure supports this. A number will make the structure move up and that is all.*

*Councilman Touchet asked Ike about the Fire Department's law. Ike stated it is the same but we have a history with the Police Department (not accepting an across the board raise). The Fire Department has accepted this in the past.*

*Mayor Piazza stated the way the Fire Department does the increases in rank whenever somebody moves up in rank, they are paid 2% below the lowest paid person in that rank. Chief Mire stated that is correct. Mayor Piazza stated if we did give an across the board raise to the Fire Department, it wouldn't throw those numbers off. We would still be in legal realms of State law. That is different from the Police Department. What they do is that they have a base pay and as they move up in rank, they bring their years of longevity with them. So, if they have only been an SPO for 4 years, they are only bringing 8% of an increase with them if they move up to sergeant. So, they may not have the separation that the Fire Department does.*

*Mr. Funderburk stated as a point of clarification, all other Fire Departments have the same 15%, 25% etc. in the State but none of them comply with it. They are just ignoring State law.*

*Councilman Broussard asked Chief Spearman if his department understands this highly unique law that prohibits the Council acting immediately to adjust the pay of a starting employee. Chief Spearman answered yes.*

*Councilman Touchet stated if all three of these entities are not working together, we will not be successful. There is no money in the budget so we will have to go outside of this budget to bring additional revenue in. We are only going to be as strong as that weakest person and if we have anyone who is not united in this endeavor, this thing will not be successful. Look at what has happened in other areas in the past.*

*Chief Mire stated we are here for everyone. The Mayor gave him a list of cities to research. We found out as much information as we could. It cost about \$12,000 to hire and train a new firefighter. When we are short it causes overtime. We have 12 people that work per shift. We have an Assistant Chief, 4 Captains (one at each station) and 7 firefighters. We have 36 firefighters, 1 training officer, 1 secretary and 1 Chief. Some of these cities are not comparable to us. The City of Abbeville has a population of about 12,000 but the Abbeville Fire Department serves the whole third ward. We serve about 18,000 people. The City of Abbeville starts their firefighter at \$22,620 (without supplemental pay). The firefighter works 22 shifts per year which comes out to 2,920 hours. Federal law says 56 hours per week. In two weeks, we work 120 hours. The last 8 hours of that 120 is 8 hours overtime according to federal law. Every six shifts that these guys work for 24 hours they get paid their 8 hours*

*overtime. Out of 26 paychecks per year we get it on 20. We won't get it for the other 6 because we only worked 96 hours in that pay period. That is how a lot of our overtime works. Some of the other cities, like Baker, pays \$32,000. Morgan City starts theirs at \$22,000. Some of these cities have different budgets. The comparison was extremely difficult because some cities didn't want to tell us how many hours their shifts work and some others worked different shifts than us. We are in the same boat as the Police Department. Our problem is not retaining people. He gets people who have their Firefighter 1 and are ready to come to work for the City but when he tells them they will make \$22,000 per year, they are not interested. It does not matter that they have 48 hours off and can get a second job. They just don't want to mess with it. It takes a long time to fill positions. It is the starting guy at the bottom that needs more money. These are the ones that we need. Chief Mire stated his guys are trained for more than just fighting fires. They are trained for car accidents, medicals, and CPR. Their training is non-stop. Right now, we are doing the fire rating for the City so we are gathering all that information. Every time you see a fire truck responding in the City of Abbeville, some report has to be completed. In 2018, we had 31 structure fires, 9 vehicle fires, other fires, 750 rescue medical calls, hazardous condition calls, service calls, 77 good intent call and other false calls. In 2018 they ran 1136 calls. The total fire loss in our response area was about \$650,000.*

*Mayor Piazza stated that he is not knocking our department because it is very comforting to the citizens of Abbeville that we are running so many medical calls. That is a great service. We are also providing that service to hundreds of calls that are made outside of the City limits. Of our \$3,000,000 budget for the Fire Department, about how much do we receive from other fire departments and the Police Jury? Chief Mire stated every time we get in line the parish will purchase a new fire truck. We just purchased two fire trucks in 2017. The Parish gave us \$258,000 for one of those trucks. Each truck was \$350,000 so they paid for a good portion of that truck. The City of Abbeville paid for the other truck. They also pay us so much for person. It is about \$22,000 per quarter. That is through the M & O Account. That pays for the loan on the trucks. We get a 2% rebate that is usually about \$80,000 per year. The Mayor has let us deposit that into M & O for equipment and other things we need. The Vermilion Parish Fire Association decided a long time ago, when we started getting rated, (mutual aid) that if there is a fire in Kaplan, we will use our aerial truck. We help each other out. If we get a big structure fire, we need a lot of people.*

*Mayor Piazza stated the point he is trying to make is that we are surveying other municipalities and these other municipalities may not be making that many response calls outside of their City limits. Our taxpayers in Abbeville are footing the bill for this. About 1/3 of our calls are outside the City limits. That is why other department's budget are lower.*

*Mayor Piazza stated the big question is where will this additional revenue proposed to come from?*

*Councilman Touchet asked if the other employees outside the Police and Fire could speak now before we get into the revenue sources.*

*Stewart Head stated he agrees the lower guy is not making that much money. All cities are looking for linemen. We have trouble getting them and keeping them. The young guys are not looking at retirement and insurance. Power is critical. If the lights don't stay on then none of us will get paid. He is trying to keep his guys here that he has and he is trying to get people to come in. We have been fighting this for the last 3 or 4 years.*

*Councilman Touchet stated Stewart is right. Without the electricity on, nothing runs in this City. That has been the golden egg that keeps things moving for us. That is what makes us different between us and any municipality. He has looked thoroughly at the Water, Sewer, Street and Administration departments and he doesn't understand how some of these people make it.*

*Stewart Head stated he agrees it is the entire City. He is having trouble keeping his guys after he trains them. Councilman Broussard stated it is in the best interest of the citizens if we can improve retention of employees. It is also good for every department in the City. Stewart stated they also help other surrounding areas too because they are having the same issues we are.*

*Councilman Touchet asked Stewart what is the guy who can get in the bucket and work on the line when it is hot making at SLEMCO or LUS? Stewart stated those guys are making more than he makes.*

*Councilman Plaisance stated our electrical crew has a response time of about 15 minutes. Stewart agreed that the City of Abbeville has the best response time in the area. Councilman Plaisance stated they work in some of the worst weather and are up on the poles. It is very dangerous work.*

*Mayor Piazza asked Stewart what his linemen are making now. Stewart stated they are making between \$20.00 and \$21.00 per hour. Mayor Piazza stated at SLEMCO and LUS they are making about \$35.00 per hour. He has a survey from APPA that Mike Marcotte sent to him. A journeyman line worker which is comparable to our lineman 2 positions, their average pay is \$34.41 per hour. The linemen in Alexandria make between \$21.00 to \$23.00 per hour. Qualified linemen working for contractors in the area make about \$34.00 per hour for the same work. We are also competing against the contractors. We advertised in the Daily Advertiser, the Morning Advocate and other State-wide agencies for months since this past summer (6 months) and we received one applicant. We were advertising top pay for a lineman, fully paid health insurance, retirement, vacation and full benefits and we only got one applicant that barely knew how to get in a bucket truck.*

*Mr. Larry Moore, Jr. stated that he does not have anybody leaving right now. His guys know what they are dealing with. It is hard. We do a lot of work. We are out there in the heat, in the cold, in the mud and we are called out of our beds at 2:00 AM to go repair a water leak or replace fire hydrants. It makes it complicated. We are working with what we have. He has a crew of 3 employees plus a backhoe operator. It is a good crew. We take care of the whole City. That is a lot for 3 people. We complain to each other but we get the job done. He spoke with the guys and they are all in agreement with a pay raise across the board for everyone.*

*Mr. Richard Sysak stated he has 3 guys on his crew. He is doing pretty good but his guys can use a pay raise. He has been with the City almost 35 years. We all need a raise especially the young workers who have children. Councilman Touchet asked who can do the work if you are not there? Richard stated Milton can do the work when he is well and Little Milton is learning fast. We help everybody. The grass cutting crew definitely need more money. They are young and have children. They fight the heat and a lot of the elements.*

*Mayor Piazza stated the last Mid-Size Cities Conference he attended he asked the question to other municipalities what they were paying their Street Department. He is embarrassed to say the number in public because we were so far below some of the other municipalities. If we are successful in giving pay increase, the pay increase will not be given to the individual, it will be given to the pay plan. It will be given to base salary. Councilman Touchet stated it has to be both. If we give an employee a \$2.00 raise then you want to also look at the starting salary for that particular position and take care of that too. Here is the Street guy who is making \$7.41 and you give him a \$2.00 raise so he will make \$9.41 but somebody will come into that position after they leave so we have to take care of the starting pay too. You have to take care of the people but you also have to take care of that starting salary.*

*Kelly Mire stated this is a numbers game. It will come down to the numbers. In the Fire Department everyone has more than this job. They work somewhere else or own a business. We have one firefighter that works 4 jobs. Every person has something to supplement their salary. We thank you for the insurance. That retains the employee. It is not what gets someone here. They are looking at what buys that milk and bread. What are all these employees worth? Citizens call us on the worst day that they have had in their life. Mr. Ronnie Trahan, his wife called us, as soon as we walked into the door, he coded. Firefighter Beau Barras and Eric Meaux started CPR. This guy came back and gave us awards out of his own pocket because he was so thankful. The gentleman that owns Guidry's Bike Shop, the same thing happened with him. It will come down to what's it worth to this City for their employees and the service that we give them. Most of our work, Police and Fire, it happens at night. Most people don't see us at night. That is when we are cutting people out of cars. Numerous people we pull out of cars and put them in body bags. We chose this profession but now we are asking you to help us bring the milk and bread home. Thank you for considering this and we want to encourage you to help us out.*

*Roger Fontenot stated most of their work is done at the Water Plant. He appreciates all that they do. He has been here 31 years. We don't complain. Everybody's job is important. He has dedicated his life here. We all work together. We are making the water so you can drink the water, flush your toilet and take your shower. Nobody knows we are at the water plant. They would like a pay raise too.*

*Councilman Plaisance stated that we have learned that everyone's job with the City is important. It is what makes the City go. From the Mayor on down to the guy weed eating grass. If we make a proposal tonight, we will need everyone to support them and to help them get this done. You make us who we are.*

*Councilman Touchet stated we are looking at a one-half cent sales tax for an across the board pay raise. The current tax rate is 9.95%. That would yield about \$1.4 million in revenue annually. This would be on the ballot in May. We need to have pay raises for Fire, Police and Municipal employees and we also need to look at the base pay. Mayor Piazza and Councilman Plaisance can get with each department to formalize some official numbers. Ike stated we need to get our proposal to the Secretary of State by March to get it on the May ballot.*

-01 introduced by Mr. Francis Touchet, Jr. and seconded by Mr. Francis Plaisance to recommend to the City Council to seek voter approval on the May ballot for a one-half cent sales tax to be used for pay raises for the Police Department, Fire Department and Municipal Employees. The motion carried unanimously.

There being no further business to discuss, Mayor Piazza declared this meeting adjourned.

ATTEST:

APPROVE:

Kathleen S. Faulk  
Secretary-Treasurer

Mark Piazza  
Mayor