



FIRE DEPARTMENT

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To: Members of the Local Government Committee, House of Representatives
Montana State Legislature

From: Michael L. Painter, Chief
Jason Diehl, Assistant Chief
Missoula Fire Department

Date: January 27, 2011

RE: Opposition To HB 231 – "Repeal requirements for municipalities to hire career paid firefighters"

Honorable Members of the Local Government Committee:

We write today to express our opposition to HB 231, which proposes significant changes to state laws regarding fire departments in Montana.

We believe that these changes would negatively impact not only the fire departments of municipalities, but also affect for the worse the cooperative relationships between career fire departments and their neighboring districts and volunteer departments.

The volunteer fire service in Montana has a long & proud history of providing fire and other emergency services to the citizens of our state. The majority of the vast geographic area of our state and a significant percentage of Montana's population is provided fire protection and often additional emergency services by volunteers serving with their local volunteer fire departments or working in conjunction with career fire personnel serving combination departments. Those volunteers invest their time & energy in serving their communities with little or no compensation and often without due recognition for the hazards and sacrifices involved in that work.

Montana's current laws regarding establishment of career fire departments grew from a recognition that as a community's population grows, its calls for emergency services increase as well. Cities and towns incorporate in part to provide for the common welfare of their residents – particularly to ensure the full-time availability of essential services such as police and fire protection.

All of Montana's communities have established some form of organized fire service – those fire agencies include small volunteer fire departments and fire districts of all sizes and make-up, in addition to municipal departments in our cities staffed entirely by career personnel.

Montana's cities call upon their career fire departments to provide an immediate response to a wide range of incidents - including the need for emergency medical services, fires, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescue and others. Training requirements for those disparate disciplines make it difficult for even career fire departments to ensure that personnel are adequately trained and equipped to safely respond to their community's needs. Response time goals established by NFPA standards and department staffing levels established by ISO (affecting fire insurance premiums) are difficult to achieve even with career staff on duty 24X7.

In Montana's largest communities, the volume of calls for service requires a career force. In 2009 alone, the Missoula Fire Department responded to over 6,000 emergency incidents. To suggest that our community should make effort to recruit volunteer firefighters to meet that need we believe does a disservice to both our

career firefighters and to the many volunteers who serve their smaller communities in Missoula County. Current law establishes no minimum staffing standard for municipal fire departments – each city establishes that staffing standard based on its need and its ability to fund equipment, facilities and personnel.

Our department currently has an excellent relationship with the other fire agencies in Missoula County – agencies which include both combination departments and all-volunteer fire departments and quick response units. We maintain mutual aid and/or automatic aid agreements with our immediate neighbors and have responded via Montana Mutual Aid to requests in Missoula County and our neighboring counties as well. Volunteers from several of our county cooperative agencies have been hired as career firefighters by MFD – and volunteers for those agencies have also been recruited from young men and women interested in a career fire service position.

We believe that HB 231 if passed would have a negative impact on the City of Missoula and other cities in Montana and would also harm the cooperative relationships we have established with our neighbors. We urge you to vote against this bill.

Thank you for your time & your service to the fine state we live in – your work is much appreciated.

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