

MARGARET WENTE

A nation of \$100,000 firefighters

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Everyone loves firefighters. They save lives. They are strong and competent. They look good on calendars. People are always happy when they show up.

But municipalities do not love firefighters. Across Canada, towns and cities are getting hosed by the skyrocketing costs of their fire departments. Thanks to arbitration settlements, your firefighters are the best paid (and possibly the most underworked) guys in town. Firefighters have been getting raises that are twice as high what other public sector workers have been getting, at a time when municipalities are strapped for funds and raises are just a memory for most of us.

Here in Toronto, firefighters recently won a 14-per-cent wage increase over five years, which means that by next year, a first-class firefighter will be making \$90,000. But it's the small towns that are hit worst. Tiny Owen Sound, Ont. (population 32,092), has 29 full-time fire professionals. Last year, 25 of them made more than \$100,000. The median full-time income of people who live in Owen Sound is less than half that.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

For smaller cities, the fire department is typically the largest item in the budget. It accounts for upward of a quarter of their costs. But municipalities are powerless to control firefighters' salaries, because negotiations with the union almost always wind up in arbitration. And arbitrators aren't obliged to give much weight to a town's ability to pay. Instead, they simply match the settlements that everybody else got, including police. So the costs spiral ever upward, and towns are forced to cut back on libraries and roads. As Toronto city manager Joe Pennachetti told the Toronto Sun: "We feel like we're banging our heads against the wall."

There's no good reason for salaries to go up so much, argues John Saunders, a consultant with Hicks Morley who advises dozens of municipalities. Firefighting is an extremely desirable job, and vacancies are scarce because people rarely quit. Last year, for example, there were more than 500 applicants for 20 firefighting jobs in the Ontario communities of Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo. In Cambridge, a first-class firefighter earns up to \$99,397 a year, plus benefits and overtime. Yet despite the high demand for their jobs, firefighters get "retention" payments for not quitting.

Working conditions are pretty sweet too. Thanks to modern safety standards, there are very few fires left to fight. These days, most fire department calls are medical. To prove that they're still needed, fire departments have been adding defibrillators and Jaws of Life, and frantically expanding their repertoires to respond to even minor non-fire emergencies. Still, there's an awful lot of what we shall euphemistically call "down time," which firemen fill by preparing meals, sleeping, watching television, polishing the trucks and rewinding the hoses.

It's long past time to roll back firefighting costs, as cities across the United States have been forced to do. But in Canada, costs continue to escalate as unions demand even better benefits, shorter work weeks and highly desirable 24-hour shifts. Firefighters love 24-hour shifts because it gives them plenty of time off for their other jobs. Theoretically, they're required to work seven or eight of these shifts in a 28-day period, but workers with plenty of seniority can wind up working just five or six shifts, according to Mr. Saunders. Some critics refer to the 24-hour arrangement as "a well-paid part-time job." (As for how it's possible to work 24 hours in a row, the answer is "down time.")

Not even the smallest effort to control costs goes unchallenged. In Windsor, the union grieved a decision to pull a fire truck out of service in 2008, saying that the administration had promised to leave it in service until the new contract was settled, which still hasn't happened. The arbitrator sided with the union and told the city to cough up \$381,000 in theoretically lost overtime – \$1,328 for each member of the fire department. Meanwhile, in Toronto, the firefighters' union continues its endless war against Emergency Medical Services, claiming that a decision to stop dispatching million-dollar pumpers to lower-level 911 calls puts lives at risk. A consultants' report said that a merger of fire and EMS could save the city significant money – but the tribal warfare is so bitter that it will never happen.

I have nothing against firefighters, personally. But times have changed. We can't go on like this. I could write the same column about the police. You guys are supposed to protect us. But we can't afford you any more.