

THE LOGIC OF PARITY

The Case for Competitive and Fair Compensation for Atlanta's Firefighters

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A Project of the

**Atlanta Professional Firefighters
International Association of Firefighters Local 134**



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INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY OF PARITY

The close affiliation and alliance between fire and police services in the United States is as old as the services themselves. Although these two mainstream government agencies differ markedly in purpose and function, they are closely aligned under the rubric of “public safety”. Wage parity between the services is as old as their creation. Formal police and fire departments emerged in the mid-1800’s and wage parity is documented nearly since that inception.¹ To this day, most major cities maintain wage parity between fire and police officers.

A Sampling of Municipalities that Maintain Fire / Police Pay Parity

- Cobb County, GA
- Fulton County, GA
- Gwinnett County, GA
- Cincinnati, OH
- Cleveland, OH
- Dallas, TX
- Houston, TX
- Detroit, MI
- Indianapolis, IN
- Los Angeles, CA
- New Orleans, LA
- New York, NY
- Philadelphia, PA
- Pittsburg, PA
- San Diego, CA
- San Francisco, CA
- San Jose, CA
- Seattle, WA

In the mid-1970’s Atlanta Mayor Sam Massel’s administration proposed to break parity, which resulted in firefighters staging large public protests. As a result, Atlanta’s City Council amended the budget in front of a chamber packed with firefighters and restored parity. When the council recessed the firefighters left and did not return. Before an empty chamber, the council reconvened and amended the budget yet again to break parity.

The dispute between the city and the firefighters mounted for all that year and ultimately parity was restored in the next year’s budget. There were no more proposals to break parity for the next 20 years.

Since 1998 a conflict has escalated between the City of Atlanta government and those it employs as firefighters. In that year the city broke its historic policy of pay parity between its fire and police officers. Shortly thereafter parity was restored, only to be broken again in 2001, when the city gave police \$2000 more in annual pay and a better pension than the firefighters.

The 4% pay raise in 2004 and the 3.7% raise in 2005 increased the pay disparity to \$2157 annually across the board. The total amount required to close the existing gap between police and fire pay is approximately \$1.9 million dollars.

In 2005, the administration restored parity to fire and police pensions.

If the administration's current proposal for a additional 3.5% raise for police and 0% for firefighters passes, the gap would increase by another approximately \$1.85 million dollars. This proposal would create one of the largest fire and police pay disparities of any major city nationally.

The disparate treatment of their pay, coupled with the statistics that show that Atlanta firefighters are paid far less than their peers regionally and nationally, has created a crisis of morale in the department.² Atlanta's firefighters feel strongly that they have been relegated to second-class status and that they are undeserving of such treatment.

This report seeks to explain and illustrate the source of this crisis of morale, and the effects these policies have on fire service in the City of Atlanta.

FIRE AND POLICE COMPARED

Despite having responsibility for different tasks, Atlanta fire and police officers are responsible for maintaining public safety in the Southeast's largest and most urban city. Both services involve extreme physical hazards as well as severe psychological stresses. Fire and police officers are required to provide around-the-clock protection without regard to holidays or weather conditions.

Both services swear a loyalty oath and their jobs require them to put the safety and protection of Atlanta's citizens before their own. Fire and police officers can be dismissed for cowardice if they shrink from their duty to do so.³ Because they represent the city's most solemn duty, the protection of life, fire and police officers are expected to display the highest professional and ethical standards.

As a result of their commitment to the city, 53 Atlanta firefighters have been killed in the line-of-duty, hundreds have been disabled and thousands have been burned and injured.

To maintain the strict order and discipline required in life and death operations, both services are organized in a paramilitary manner and employ military-type ranks such as lieutenant and captain.

Because of the demands made of firefighters and police, both organizations strive to be very selective in their recruitment policies, and municipalities compete vigorously for the best candidates. Due to the risks and stresses involved, and the relatively low pay when compared to the skills and education required, the best people for these jobs tend to be idealists who are motivated to serve others. These candidates are drawn to the history and tradition embodied in fire and police services.

In recognition of the physical and psychological stresses of both jobs, Atlanta, like other municipalities nationally provides for retirement of firefighters and police at age 55, and many states mandate a so-called heart, lung and cancer law that establishes a presumption that cardio-vascular disease and cancer among its members is job related. There is currently a heart and lung bill for fire and police pending in the Georgia Legislature.

Although Atlanta firefighters argue for parity with police, it is only parity in the sense of annual salary and pension multiplier. Even when paid the same annual salary, firefighters will make almost 30% less per hour. This is because Atlanta firefighters average 56 hours worked per week, as opposed to 40 hours for police, or 832 hours more annually. During a 25 year career an Atlanta firefighter will work the equivalent of 10 more years of 8-hour shifts than his police counterpart.

Some argue that firefighters don't deserve equal pay with police because they have inactive time at the station. This argument fails to consider that the hourly scale has already been adjusted to penalize firefighters 16 hours each week. During all these hours, a firefighter is required to be present at the station and to answer alarms at a moments notice.

The stereotypical fireman playing checkers in front of the station has been replaced by an 'All Hazards Technician' who is required to respond to not only fires, but technical rescues, emergency medical incidents, hazardous materials emergencies, weapons of mass destruction attacks and natural disasters, in addition to performing inspections, maintenance, training, pre-fire planning, and community service.

It is established employment policy, both in the private and public sector, that relative danger is always a consideration in determining wages. Statistics on deaths and on-the-job injuries indicate that firefighting is the more dangerous of the two occupations.

According to the most recent data derived from the U.S. Department of Labor Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries for the 4 years beginning in 2000 and ending in 2003, firefighters averaged 44.1 on the job fatalities per 100,000, while police averaged 15.9 on the job fatalities per 100,000.⁴

The most recent data available from the National Safety Council publication Accident Facts showed that firefighters averaged 6.61 lost workdays per 100 workers from injuries sustained on the job, compared to 2.51 for police.⁵

The American Heart Association ranks firefighting first of the 25 most stressful occupations. Policing ranked sixth on the list. Studies to classify the degree of stress in different occupations rely on morbidity and mortality data from stress-related diseases to provide a proxy measure of the degree psychological stress. The Public Health Service has found that cardiovascular disease rates for firefighters exceed the rates for police officers.⁶

COMPETITION FOR THE BEST CANDIDATES

Modern-day fire department operations require personnel of unusually high mechanical and technical aptitudes and training. Firefighting requires a detailed knowledge of fire behavior in various structures, pumps, hydraulics, extinguishing agents, chemical reactions and building construction. Additionally, firefighters are responsible for difficult and dangerous rescue operations, which involve the skillful use of a wide variety of specialized emergency equipment under the most hazardous circumstances. They provide life saving medical care, sometimes under extreme conditions, requiring certification as Emergency Medical Technician and Paramedic.

Municipalities regionally and nationally compete vigorously to identify and attract the best-qualified candidates. Metro Atlanta's growth will ensure that area fire departments will continue to compete for firefighters.

The City of Atlanta Turnaround Plan 2002, cites Atlanta Fire Department attrition rates for 2001 at almost six percent or 49 personnel. This attrition rate was fairly evenly divided between resignations, retirements and dismissals. Due to the large percentage of its workforce hired in the early 1980's, over the next three years the department is expected lose over 300 personnel to retirement or an average of about 100 retirements per year.

Currently, Atlanta is paying less than any major metro area department. To add insult to that injury, Atlanta firefighters are paid less than its police. A prospective employee who speaks with an Atlanta firefighter about the job is likely to find him underpaid, demoralized and bitter.

An intelligent, responsible young person, serious about a career in the fire service, is likely to realize that it would be unwise to choose an employer who pays less for more work than is available at nearby departments, or one who has designated firefighting as inferior to policing for the purposes of compensation.

If Atlanta is to hire and retain its share of the best candidates, it must remedy the under-compensation of its firefighters. This is especially critical considering that Atlanta firefighters face more complex and demanding challenges than their suburban peers.

Compounding this challenge, the creation of the City of Sandy Springs and several other new cities in formerly unincorporated areas of Fulton County will offer opportunities to experienced firefighters. If Atlanta fails to improve the compensation satisfaction, its foreseeable that many highly trained and experienced firefighters could be lured away as happened when Fulton County formed its fire department in the 1970's.

HOW TO ACCURATELY COMPARE FIREFIGHTER COMPENSATION

Police officers in Atlanta, like their peers in other cities nationally, work a 40-hour per week schedule. This makes pay comparisons for police in different departments rather straightforward: Calculate total compensation and compare the totals.

Firefighters, by contrast, work differing numbers of hours depending on which cities are surveyed. For example, it's often cited that Atlanta firefighters make almost as much as their peers in DeKalb County. However, this comparison fails to consider that DeKalb firefighters work an average of 48 hours per week while Atlanta firefighters work 56 hours per week. When the hourly variable is considered, we find that Atlanta firefighters are paid less annually despite working 416 hours more per year than DeKalb.

Firefighters have one of the most complex pay structures of all government services. This is in part a result of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) exemptions and requirements. The FLSA requires employers to pay overtime for employee hours that exceed 40 hours per week. However an exemption exists for firefighters.

Firefighters in other departments will be found working 42, 48, 53 and 56 hours per week. Atlanta firefighters work the maximum number of hours allowed under the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The number of hours worked per week has a direct impact on the quality of life and the value of the base salary. The only way to accurately compare firefighter compensation across 42, 48, 53 and 56-hour schedules is to compare the amount the firefighter is compensated per hour. To do less denies the firefighter the value of his time.

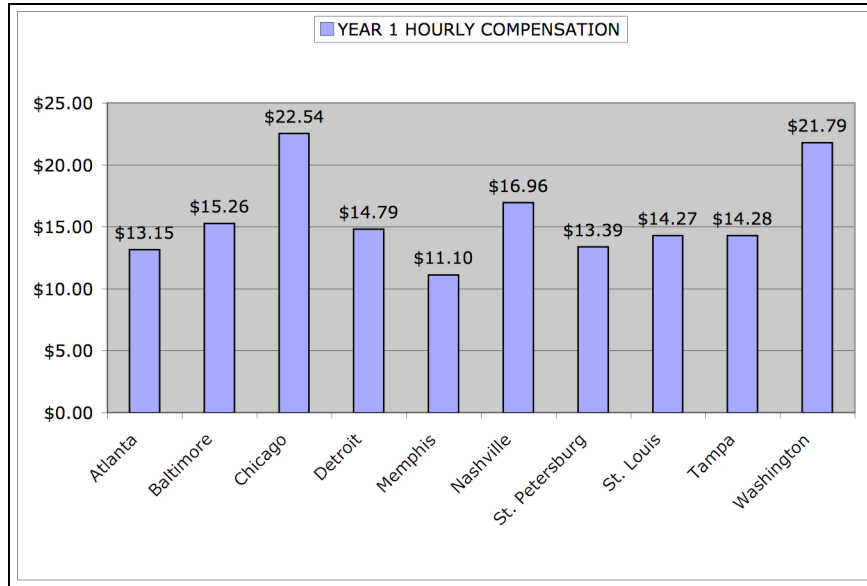
Total firefighter compensation includes: Base salary, longevity pay, shift differential, holiday pay and any other miscellaneous allowance.

Based on total compensation divided by hours worked, an entry-level Atlanta firefighter's hourly compensation is \$13.15.

The following section will compare an Atlanta firefighter's hourly compensation with other departments.

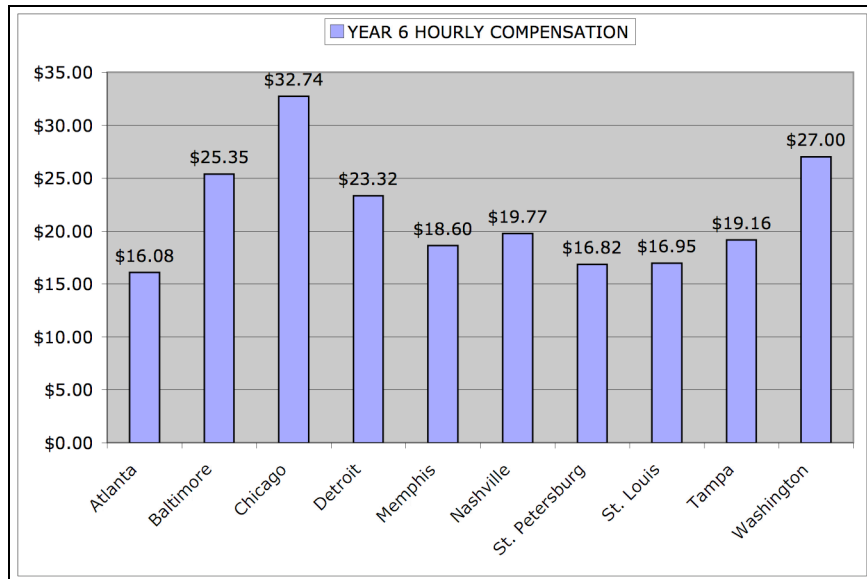
COMPARISONS WITH OTHER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

When considering pay raises for Atlanta police, the Finance Committee compared salaries with nine cities contained in the Linder Report. The following shows how Atlanta firefighters compare to firefighters in those same nine cities.

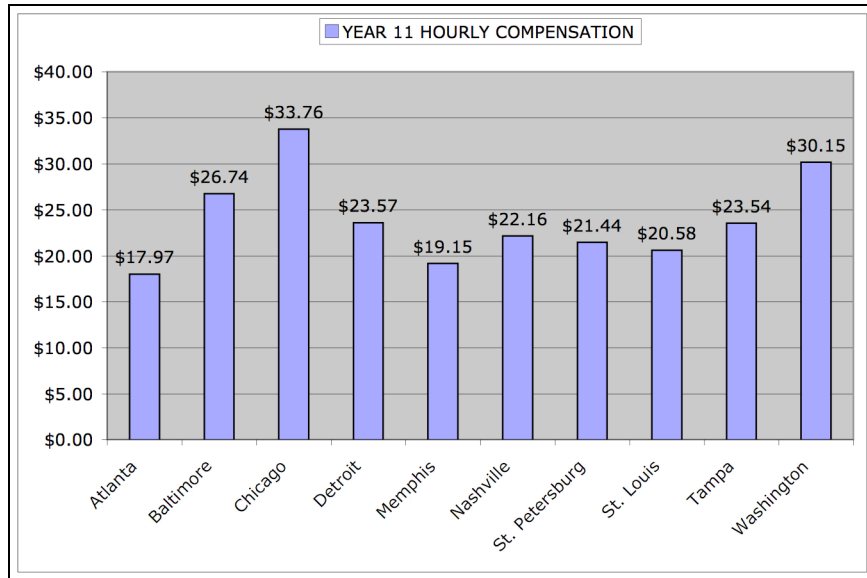


Atlanta's Lag Year 1 = 22%

In year 1, only Memphis compensates firefighters less than Atlanta. It should be noted that after a 1-year probationary period, Memphis raises firefighter compensation dramatically to \$18.60 per hour. Year one is the last year that Atlanta will not rank dead last in total compensation.

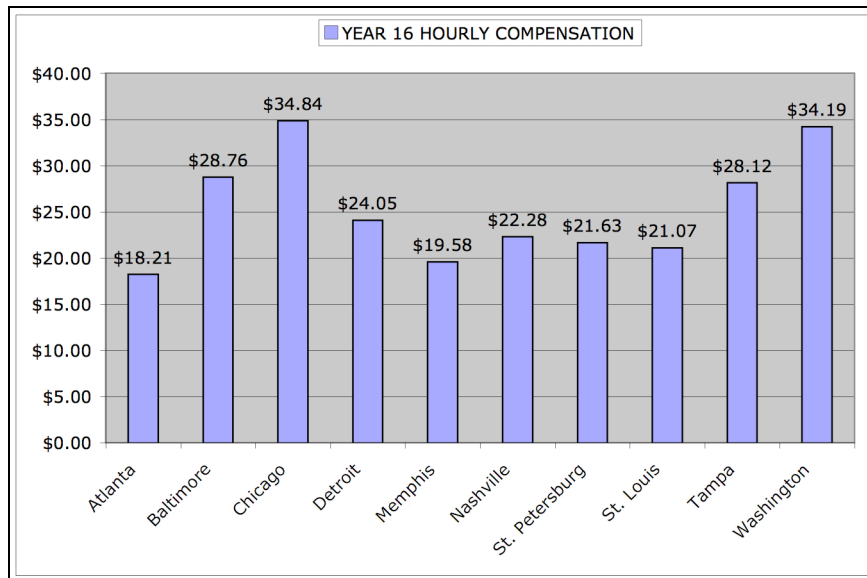


Atlanta's Lag Year 6 = 38%

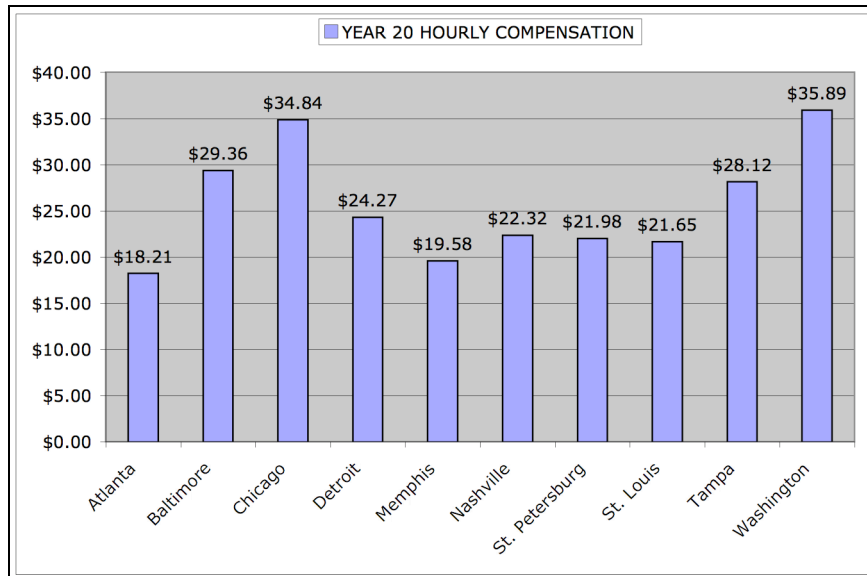


Atlanta's Lag Year 11 = 36.7%

For use as comparisons, these charts were calculated on the assumption that an Atlanta firefighter receives the annually scheduled pay increments. They in fact overstate Atlanta's pay because those increments have regularly been frozen.

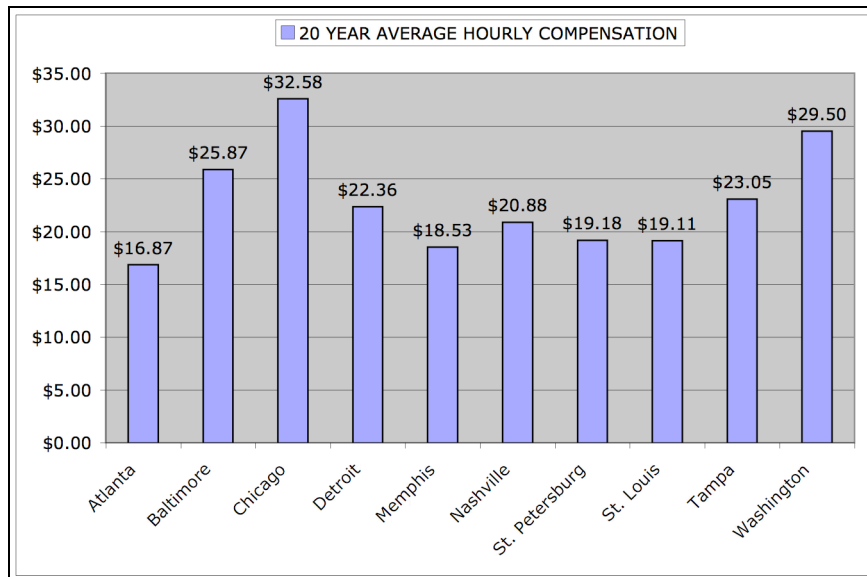


Atlanta's Lag Year 16 = 43.1%



Atlanta's Lag Year 20 = 45.2%

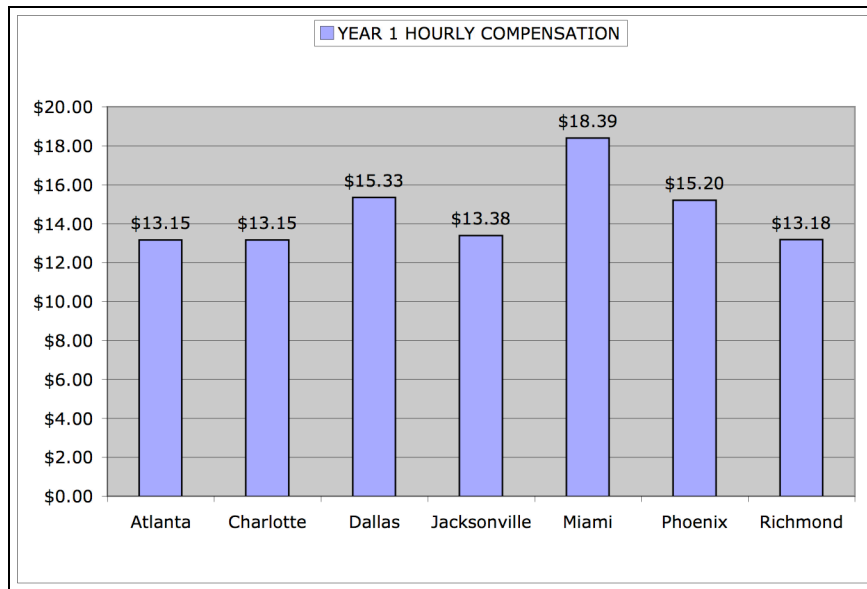
Five of the nine cities surveyed maintain wage parity between fire and police officers.



Atlanta's Average Lag Over 20 Years = 39%

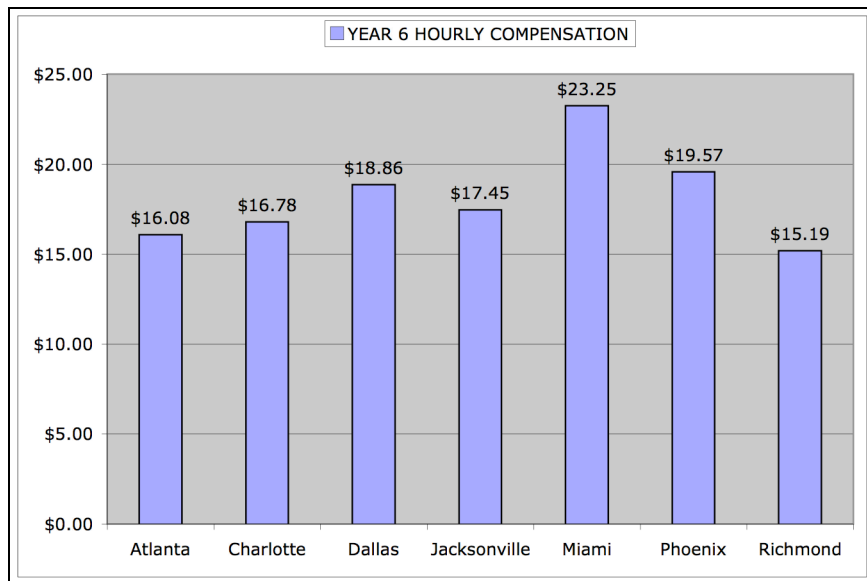
Over a 25-year career an Atlanta Firefighter will earn over 45% less than the average of these nine cities.

The following charts compare Atlanta firefighter pay with a set of six cities identified by the Finance Committee:



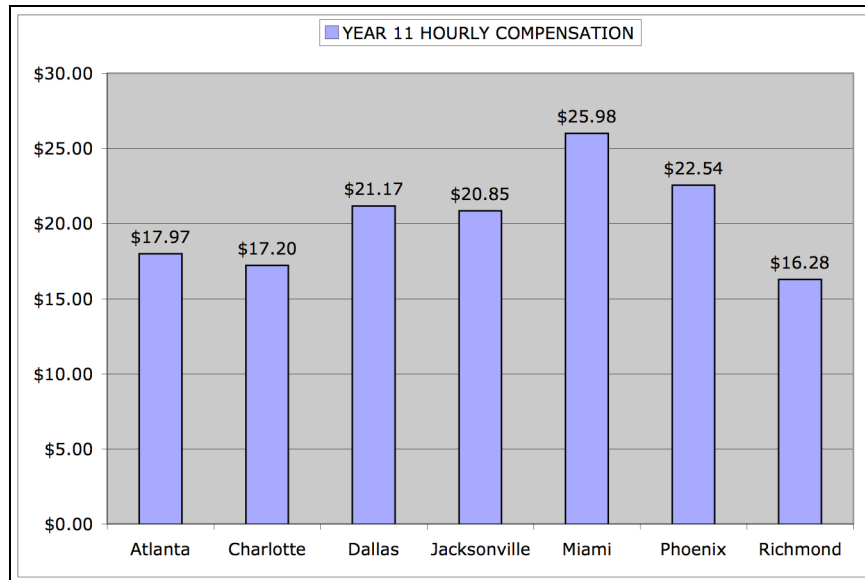
Atlanta's Lag Year 1 = 12.3%

In year one, Atlanta is tied for last with Charlotte in starting hourly rate.



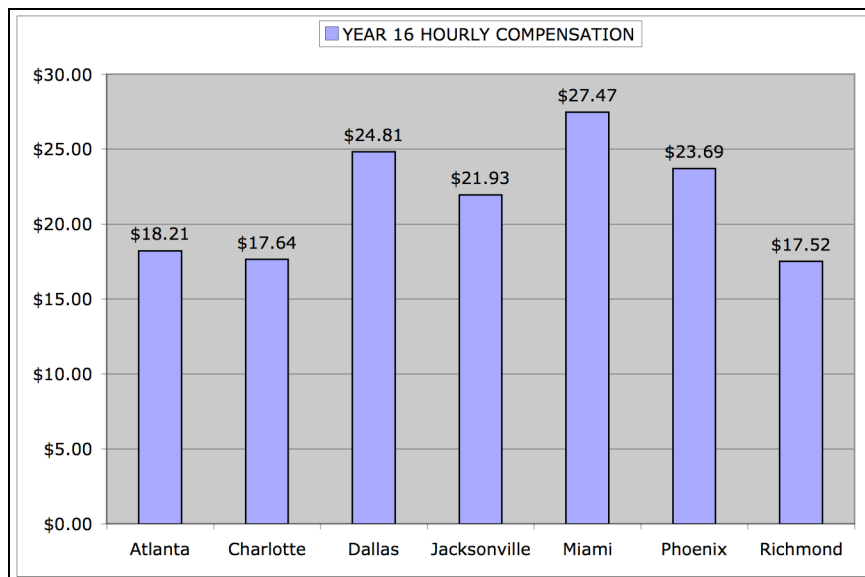
Atlanta's Lag Year 6 = 15.1%

By year six, only Richmond, Virginia pays firefighters less than Atlanta.



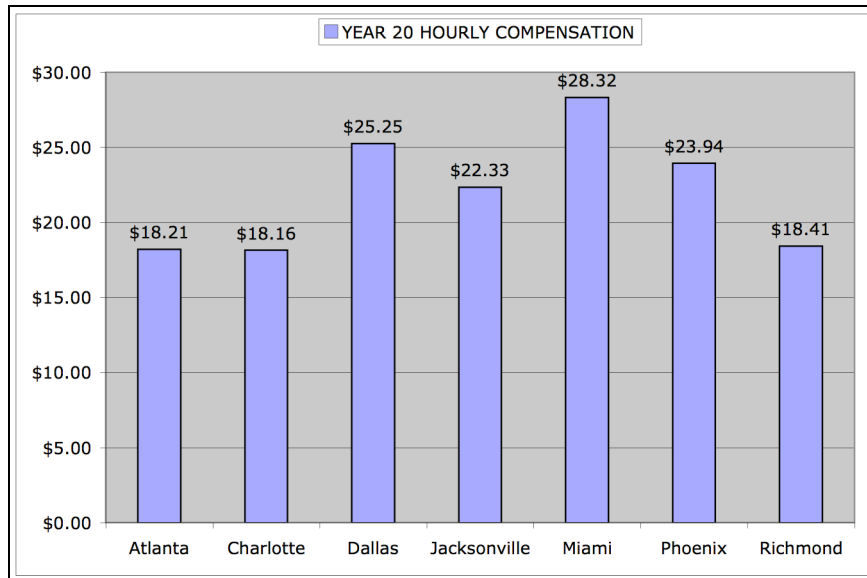
Atlanta's Lag Year 11 = 15%

In year 11, Atlanta ranks 5th of the 7 cities compared. Remember though, that these figures are misleading because they reflect Atlanta's pay scale. Atlanta doesn't actually pay according to its pay scale, because steps have been frozen for 4 of the last 5 years.



Atlanta's Lag Year 16 = 21.7%

By year 16, only Charlotte and Richmond pay less than Atlanta.

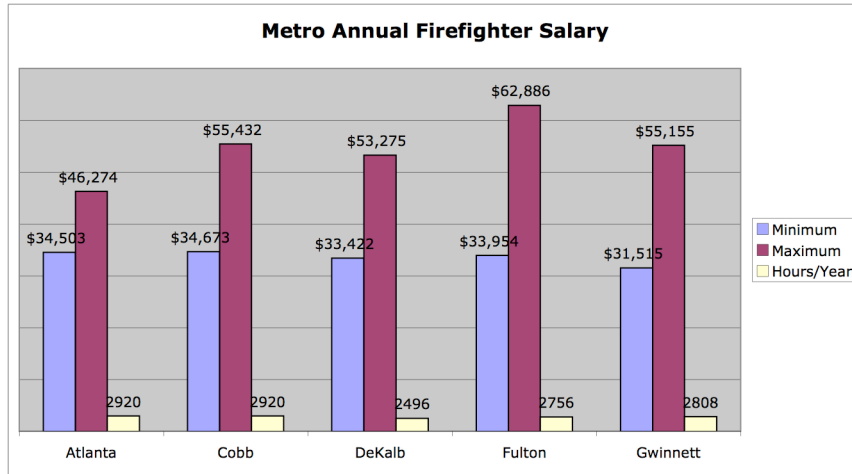


Atlanta's Lag Year 20 = 24.8%

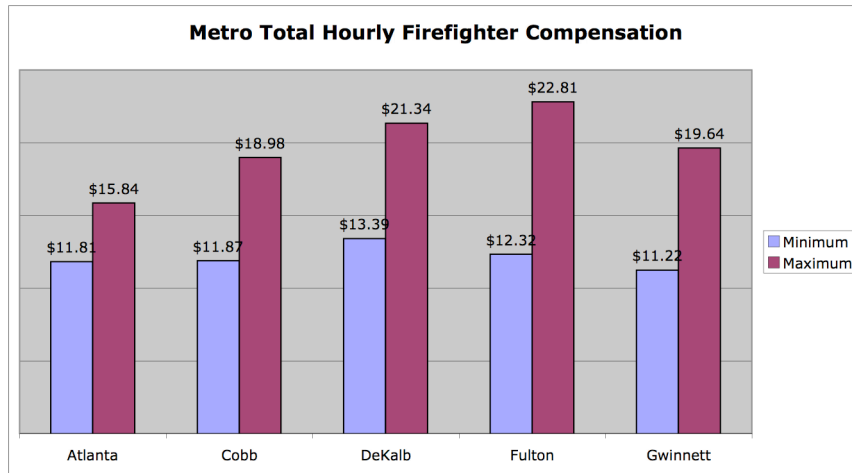
By year 20, Atlanta is second from last.

Even without considering number of hours worked (Atlanta firefighters work the maximum allowed by law), the 2005 Firehouse Magazine Run Survey found Atlanta ranked 162 in annual starting salary out of the 186 fire departments that responded to the survey.

The following charts compare Atlanta firefighter compensation to the other major metropolitan Atlanta departments using base minimum and maximum firefighter pay.



Cobb, DeKalb and Fulton firefighters receive an approximate 10% raise after year one. Cobb, Fulton and Gwinnett maintain pay parity between firefighters and police. Fulton County will undergo a reduction in force of 81 firefighters due to the incorporation of Sandy Springs. Sandy Springs is expected to hire 120 firefighters and use the same pay scale as Fulton County.



Atlanta is the lowest paid major metro-area fire department. Atlanta lags the other departments an average of 24% in maximum hourly compensation. Compounding the lag, Atlanta, unlike the other departments, regularly freezes its annual increments. It will take an Atlanta firefighter much longer to reach top pay, further reducing his total career compensation.

MORALE DESTROYERS

Frozen Increments, Broken Promises – One of the benefits promised to firefighters when they were hired is salary increments, or steps for each year of service in grade up to ten years. During 4 of the last 5 years those steps have been frozen. The savings realized by the city from these promised but frozen increments comes right out of the employee's pockets. It is difficult to calculate the income lost to firefighters by frozen increments over their career, but there can be no doubt that it constitutes a substantial percentage of their anticipated career earnings.

Business Practices, Through the Looking Glass – In her presentation to the Finance Committee of a 3.5% raise for police and 0% for firefighters, Mayor Franklin stated that she was employing sound business practices. She says higher salaries are necessary to address attrition in the police department. But it's also sound business practice to reward positive results. Firefighters feel they're being penalized for doing a good job.

In 2005, the Atlanta Fire Rescue Department greatly expanded its mission, capabilities and services to the citizens. In addition to our operational duties of providing fire suppression and prevention, emergency medical care, hazardous material mitigation, and technical rescue response, the following is a short list of accomplishments:

- Assisted in the Hurricane Katrina rescue and relief efforts representing Atlanta's goodwill to the devastated residents of the Gulf Coast
- Established two Georgia Search and Rescue (GSAR) teams as part of an expanded Homeland Security Effort
- Placed in service 9 Advanced Life Support engines delivering paramedic-level care to those who live, work and visit Atlanta
- Re-qualified to be one of only 106 Fire Departments nationally to receive accreditation by the Commission of Fire Accreditation International
- Activated a 24-hour Customer Service Van to provide support to those impacted by fire and other emergencies
- Carried out an extensive Smoke Alarm installation program
- Filled existing personnel vacancies with a highly qualified diverse workforce

Atlanta Police and Fire Foundation – In July 2002, Atlanta City Council unanimously passed a resolution authorizing the creation of an Atlanta Police and Fire Foundation to solicit donations for improvements in public safety programs. Shortly afterwards the Atlanta Police Foundation was established, but the Fire Department was excluded.

The Atlanta Police Foundation has become a well-funded and politically influential organization made up of a who's who of Atlanta's business community. It lobbies tirelessly for better police salaries, programs and equipment for police officers. But

because the Fire Department was excluded, contrary to the expressed will of the Council, firefighters are left without the comparable advocacy organization.

The following pages contain the legislation and other documents related to the Atlanta Police and Fire Foundation.

CONCLUSIONS

Atlanta's lag behind market rates for the compensation of firefighters in comparable cities is so great, that it's unlikely to catch up in the near term given current fiscal constraints. Restoring pay parity between fire and police officers would be feasible and result in a dramatic improvement in firefighter's compensation satisfaction and morale. This would result in making Atlanta more competitive among metro area departments and better able to compete for the best candidates locally.

Parity between fire and police should be written into the City Code so as to remove the anxiety firefighters are subjected to annually at budget time and to restore harmony in public safety.

¹ D. Lewin, "Wage Parity and the Supply of Police and Firemen," *Journal of Collective Negotiations in the Public Sector*, September 1978, pp. 279-85.

² "2003 National Run Survey," *Firehouse Magazine*, August 2004.

³ City of Atlanta Fire Department Rule Book, Page 13, Rule 2.48

⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) Report, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003.

⁵ *Accident Facts*, National Safety Council, 1990 (Last year that public employee data was included).

⁶ Cited in Oklahoma State University, *International Fire Service Training Association Newsletter*, Winter 1989.