

FIRE SERVICES WILL GO PRIVATE AT SRQ

SARASOTA, Florida (USA) - Firefighting services at Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport will be conducted by a private Arizona company starting October 1st.

The Sarasota Manatee Airport Authority voted 4-1 on August 15th in favor of outsourcing its fire services despite pleas by union firefighters.

"Our current firefighters have been long, loyal employees," said Michael Stephenson, president of the Suncoast Professional Firefighters & Paramedics Local 2546, which represented 12 airport firefighters whose jobs were at issue. The unit also included three fire captains.

Stephenson asked the authority board to reject a proposal to hire Rural/Metro Corp., a private contractor based in Scottsdale, Ariz. The proposal's effect would be to replace current airport firefighters with Rural/Metro workers.

"The airport staff has informed you in the narrative that this plan will save approximately \$327,000," said Blair Cook, an airport firefighter for 23 years who has also represented the union in contract talks that, despite 18 months of negotiations, failed to reach a new agreement.

"While this figure may be true, is it really fair to expect 14 senior employees to bear the burden of such a dramatic cut?" he asked the board.

William Behrens, a 23-year veteran airport firefighter, told the board that 27 children would be affected from among the firefighters' families.

"It just breaks my heart he may lose what he loves most," Behrens' daughter, Tiffany Chatzistamatis, 22, told the board. She said if the proposal were adopted, it would destroy many families. After speaking, she sobbed in her father's arms.

Airport President and Chief Executive Officer Fred J. Piccolo told the board that when negotiations did not produce a contract agreement, the union favored seeking outside bids. "Not once did anyone object until this morning," he said.

Piccolo called the issue a "difficult decision" but said he had a fiduciary responsibility and that "cost is a critical factor."

Airport officials compiled a table comparing what the firefighters would have received had they accepted the airport's most recent contract offer. Management fees, salaries and benefits came to about \$1.18 mil-

lion, while Rural/Metro's totalled \$855,364.

Union firefighters' retirement costs came to \$151,335.93. Piccolo said that Rural/Metro offers employees a 401(k) match arrangement instead.

The total cost of the airport firefighting unit would have come to a little more than \$1.28 million, compared to Rural/Metro's total of \$955,449.

Authority Chairman Paul A. Sharff, who cast the sole vote against the proposal, wanted to know why airport officials and firefighters were unable to reach a contract agreement, and whether it would be useful to resume talks.

John M. Hament, a labor attorney with Kunkel, Miller & Hament, who represented the airport in negotiations, told Sharff that the two sides "were down to a handful of issues," but that he could not detail the snags because the paperwork was elsewhere. Sharff replied that "the blame is on the union representatives" because they were "asking for the moon."

Commissioner Bob Waechter asked whether unemployed airport firefighters will receive their pension money, to which Piccolo replied that he "could look at" providing a lump sum buy-out.

Kenneth K. Smith, Rural/Metro's deputy director, said his company offered competitive salaries, benefits and training, noting it had contracts to serve more than 400 communities in 26 states.

"We're tickled to get the contract. We look forward to working with the airport," said Charles E. Smith, division general manager for Rural/Metro Special Fire Group.

After the vote, about 30 firefighters from the airport, Charlotte County, Venice, Bradenton, Sarasota, Englewood, Northport and Longboat Key gathered in the parking lot at McClure Auditorium, near the airport terminal where the meeting was held.

"I think it's rotten," Airport Fire Capt. John Zwilling said of the outcome.

Although Piccolo held out the possibility that some of the unemployed firefighters might be rehired by Rural-Metro, Behrens said he would not apply. (*Article by Sara Kennedy, Herald Today Staff Writer, August 16, 2006*)