

Santa Cruz City Firefighters, IAFF Local 1716
Candidate Questionnaire 2006
Mike Rotkin's Responses

1) The National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) policy 1710 recommends staffing levels of one line firefighter for every thousand of population served. Our current staffing falls well below this standard. Do you support making adequate staffing a priority? What criteria do you support for determining staffing levels?

I believe that it is accurate that we are far below the staffing levels recommended by NFPA policy. The situation is even worse than suggested by population figures alone. Because Santa Cruz has so many visitors and is the County Seat, we actually have more public safety problems than typically associated with a population of 59,000 residents. Our calls for service per population are far above those neighboring cities. Consequently, I support finding a way to increase our Fire Department staffing levels.

Unfortunately, our budget crisis does not allow that to happen in the short term. That is why, if I am re-elected, so much of my energy over the next four years will be focused on building up the City's tax base. We need to develop the resources to pay our employees a competitive wage and provide them with benefits that do not continue to erode every year. Both the Fire and Police Departments are understaffed and in need of higher funding levels. I am working hard to pass Measure H, so we can continue to support public safety in the short-term, but in the long-term our City needs to grow our business sector to support the level of public safety and other services expected by our local community. I believe that I am in a good position to make that happen.

2) A recent effort to consolidate the Santa Cruz City Fire Department with the Scotts Valley Fire District failed to come to fruition. Attempts to merge with the UCSC Fire Department stall repeatedly. What are your views on Fire Department consolidation within the County? Do you think it is a good idea? Would you support efforts to do so in the future.

I support efforts at consolidation and I worked hard on the recent effort to make this happen with Scotts Valley. In the end, it failed to materialize because Scotts Valley felt that they could not afford to bring their wages and benefits up to the level of the City Fire Department. But I worked closely with members of Local 1716 throughout the process to make sure that we would not be consolidating in a way that would undermine the wages and benefits of City Firefighters or otherwise harm our employees. We did manage to get past the usual jurisdictional foolishness which often kills such efforts, and I think Santa Cruz went well more than half way to meet the folks from Scotts Valley, but in the end, the effort fell short. I still think that consolidation makes sense, particularly because we are so interdependent already and consolidation would lead to some savings in management, equipment, and other overhead costs.

I have pressed on every Chancellor in the past few decades on the need for consolidating UCSC's department with the Santa Cruz City Fire Department, but for reasons that escape me, they have had no interest in this possibility and have none at the present time. I am prepared to put real energy into responding to any new openings that occur for such consolidation efforts and I do intend to raise the issue with the new Interim Chancellor George Blumenthal.

3) What do you support/propose to create a sustainable fiscal model for the City of Santa Cruz? How would you balance neighborhood concerns with the need to generate revenue for the City?

I want to work with the community to find a way to increase our local tax base so we can provide City employees with the compensation they deserve and so the City can support public safety, social services, and recreation. We need to find a way to do this that does not destroy the environment or human scale of our community, both of which are part of what make Santa Cruz such a wonderful place to live and work.

I think that the way to approach this question is by creating a broad-based community discussion of our priorities and a consensus plan for moving forward. The Council cannot impose its vision for an economically sustainable future on our residents. We have to help them understand why economic sustainability is so important and why particular projects make economic sense for our community. I have a great deal of experience in doing this kind of work, which involves a combination of grassroots initiatives to draw our residents into a dialogue about how we do and do not want our city to develop. Our solutions have to be both visionary and pragmatic at the same time. I believe that I have demonstrated my ability to work with diverse groups of individuals and organizations to make this process successful. It will not be easy, but it simply needs to happen.

More concretely, we need to play to our strengths as a community and welcome employers who will appreciate our highly educated community and our wonderful natural environment. Our initiative to create a high-tech industrial area on the Westside of Santa Cruz is a start in this direction, but we still have a long way to go with that initiative. We also need to help establish an eco-tourist industry based on our National Marine Sanctuary, our greenbelt, our strong arts community, and our attractive local environment. Green industries, based on our local green building ordinance, are also an important part of this mix. We need to approve more hotel rooms and some kind of a conference center for off-season tourism development. There is no reason any of this has to be located in residential neighborhoods.

We also need to develop our local arts community into more of an economic base for our community. We are currently working on developing an industrial

design center in Santa Cruz that would draw national and international firms here for design consulting.

Finally, I want to find a way to work with the University so it will become a more responsible member of the local community and take more responsibility for mitigating the negative impacts it has on our neighborhoods and the City budget.

4) When issues that impact the City Fire Department come before the City Council will you actively seek information from Local 1716?

As in the past, I will work closely with the leadership and members of Local 1716 on any matters related to the Fire Department. I believe I have proven myself to be accessible and responsive. I will also, as in the past, carry initiatives improving the Fire Department from Local 1716 and present them to City staff and the Council. This is an area where I believe I have a strong track record in my previous five terms.

5) As the population of Santa Cruz has grown, the number of emergency calls has dramatically increased. In contrast, the number of firefighters, stations, and fire apparatus has remained static. At what point do you see the City adding staffing, units, or stations to address this? What criteria or benchmarks should be used to decide action on this issue?

I think that the question here is not so much whether there is a need for an increase in the number of firefighters, units, or stations, but rather how we can pay for the increases which are so obviously justified. If any candidates tell you that they will just increase spending in this area immediately, you will, of course, question whether they understand anything about our current budget crisis. But we have needed a fourth station (perhaps in consolidation with UCSC), new fire equipment, and more firefighters for some time now. We need to elect council members who both believe that the need is justified, which I do, and who will work to raise the City revenues necessary to fund the sorely needed expansion, which I will also do.

6) Most cities (including some cities used for political and economic comparisons) dedicate a larger percentage of their budgets to public safety. Do you feel our department is under funded or are their departments over funded?

We are under funded! I am not sure it is a question of percentage of the City budget as much as how much is in that budget. Over the past four years while we made major reductions in the Parks budget and smaller, but still substantial, cuts in the Police budget, the Fire Department budget was relatively protected. We simply cannot safely make any more cuts in the Fire Department and still have a force capable of responding to the daily calls for service. But that does not mean that the current Fire Department budget is at an acceptable level. As I

explained above, it needs to be expanded to provide the basic service our citizens deserve and expect.

7) Currently, the Santa Cruz Fire Department has no training facility. We conduct our training and drills on vacant lots and sparsely traveled roadways. With the city nearing build-out these options are rapidly disappearing. Do you think this is an issue worthy of your attention? How would you approach solving this problem?

This problem has been getting worse for some time now. This is a good area where either consolidation or perhaps a shared facility with nearby fire agencies would make a lot of sense. I think we should investigate whether some of the massive homeland security funds might be used productively in our community. We should be seeking grants to fund this and seeking out federal funding which could be used in this area. I am prepared to work with the new Fire Chief and members of Local 1716 on making some headway in this area. This might also be an area for cooperation with UCSC and/or Cabrillo College where the facility might be part of their educational program. Perhaps they could provide us with the land and we might be able to get federal funding to build the structures we need for training on it.

8) What is your understanding of the role and function of the Fire Department within the city? Would you be interested in scheduling a ride along with a fire crew to experience what this job is like first hand? Do you have any questions for us?

I do know that most of our calls these days are not for fires, but rather medical/accident calls and that the volume of calls is far higher per population than surrounding communities. We made a great leap forward when we began to train our firefighters to do medical work and there are certainly possibilities to expand this direction even further. Of course, in doing so we will have to work closely with Local 1716 to make sure that we do it in a way that is consistent with the needs of the people doing the work.

I would love to go on a ride along for a shift. It has been about two decades since I did my last one and it is no doubt time to do it again.

I would be very excited to have the endorsement of the City Firefighters and, whether or not I get it, I will continue to work hard to be your advocate in City government. My only question is when you will make your endorsement decision so if I get it I can get it printed in my literature?

Thanks,

mike