

Lisa Vorderbrueggen: Fire chief uses tax dollars for Harvard class

[By Lisa Vorderbrueggen](#)

[Contra Costa Times](#)

Posted: 06/17/2011 07:45:10 PM PDT

Updated: 06/20/2011 07:13:31 AM PDT

Contra Costa fire Chief Daryl Louder is in serious hot water with his bosses.

First, the chief, whose budget is drowning faster than a match in the eye of a fire hose, quietly billed the county \$11,200 for the tuition to a prestigious three-week "Senior Executives in State and Local Government" program at Harvard University.

Then he left for Massachusetts on the eve of a union vote on a tentative contract packed with an unprecedented \$6.2 million in pay cuts for his front-line firefighters and dispatchers.

"I am not pleased, not pleased at all," said Contra Costa Supervisor Karen Mitchoff, of Pleasant Hill. "This shows very poor judgment on the chief's part."

"This is bad timing," concurred Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond.

The supervisors only learned of the chief's absence after his "out of the office" email alert hit their inboxes.

They asked County Administrator David Twa to inquire into the whereabouts of their fire chief.

Twa was not pleased, either.

"Given the sensitive nature of current labor negotiations, this expenditure does not create a favorable view of our attempts to control costs and avoid further negative impacts to the fire budget," Twa wrote the chief in a terse email distributed to the supervisors and other staff members last week. "In any event, you are out of state for three weeks during this critical time when we are dealing with labor negotiations and with the issue of whether or not to reduce services as of July 1 to deal with the budget."

Even Firefighters Local 1230 President Vince Wells was surprised.

"I didn't know he was spending district money but I would question the use of district funds for educational enhancements at a time when we have service cuts on the table," Wells said.

Reached at Harvard, where he is living in a dorm room, Louder sounded genuinely baffled over the fuss.

He says his employment contract covers tuition and books for any program of his choice and he is entitled to a \$900 professional development stipend. Mindful of the district's fiscal predicament, he says he paid travel costs out of his own pocket.

It is an investment in the district, Louder insists.

Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government program brings together 55 government executives from around the world and the nation in an effort to help them learn best practices from one another, Louder said.

"I understand the timing question and I know that we are facing challenging times," Louder said. "What I am hoping to do with this experience and this education is to be able to leverage myself to be a better leader, a better manager and a better communicator to help the district work through these challenging times."

If his bosses buy that explanation, it will also serve as an example of the adage about how it is better to ask for forgiveness than for permission.

GOT POLITICS? Read the Political Blotter at IBAbuzz.com/politics.