Fire Department budget request criticized

Baton Rouge Fire Department Chief Marvin Castello’s budget request for 1987 doesn’t place enough emphasis on fire suppression and prevention, according to the president of the local firefighters union.

Two new fire stations and two new fire trucks are among the requests by Castello in a budget that asks for nearly $5 million more for next year than this year.

Also included in 1987’s $18 million budget request is $1.25 million to pay the second installment on a judgment from a longstanding lawsuit that awarded firefighters $3.6 million in back pay, records show.

The $18 million budget request compares with a $13.1 million current budget.

Castello requested 245 firefighters in the budget proposal, the same number as last year.

That’s not enough, according to Mike Stephens, president of Firefighters Local 557.

“We’re actually responding to fires with less firefighters than we were in 1980,” Stephens said. “We’ve got to have that 268 (firefighters) that he (Castello) requested last year.”

The department also needs another nine captains and nine equipment operators, he said.

Stephens said he was not totally dissatisfied with the budget request.

“I’m glad that he’s requesting some additional capital outlay to replace the two temporary stations and repair and maintain the others,” he said. However, he added that capital outlay requests in recent years have not been approved.

Castello said if the budget request is approved, the two new stations would be built in place of temporary stations on Flannery Road and on Old Hammond Highway.

“Our biggest need in capital outlay is our stations and fire trucks,” the chief said. “I think we should buy a fire truck every year.”

Besides the stations and trucks, Castello wants money for 10 automobiles for the department.

Another item in the budget request calls for eight additional employees in the hazardous materials division, budget records show.

Despite the department’s requirements, Castello said the city is not in danger of losing its Class 1 fire rating from the Insurance Services Office.