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Mayor & fire union prez see red

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DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

Mayor Bloomberg traded barbs with a top fire union leader yesterday, with the mayor blasting union leadership for allegedly "playing with people's lives."

The ugly war of words escalated a day after Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta accused the city's fire union leaders of deliberately slowing the response times to emergencies as part of a scheme to reopen firehouses and increase staffing.

"Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta's feeble attempt to blame the Fire Department's documented failures on my union and me personally was the desperate act of a desperate man," said Capt. Peter Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association.

"He's an ineffective, weak leader," Gorman fumed.

Citywide response times to fires averaged 4 minutes, 35 seconds from January to April this year, compared to 4:17 for the corresponding period last year.

Scoppetta said a push by the Uniformed Fire Officers Association and Uniformed Firefighters Association to have FDNY rigs halt at red lights and stop signs - instead of slowing down and rolling through intersections, according to policy - led to the bulk of the delays.

The unions' alleged misconduct is jeopardizing the safety of New Yorkers, Scoppetta said. Bloomberg agreed yesterday.

"Playing with people's lives for your own purposes is just an outrage," the mayor said on his weekly WABC-AM radio show.

Gorman countered that FDNY brass pushed to improve driver safety after a fire rig ran a red light in the Bronx and killed a civilian last July.

As a result of the safety push, accidents involving fire rigs - with lights and

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sirens blazing - fell to 68 from 137 for the first four months of this year. The FDNY also put cameras on rigs at four firehouses, Gorman said.

Response times on those rigs have increased, Gorman said, though he could not say by how much. Gorman also insisted that City Hall's decision to close six firehouses in 2003 contributed to the increased response times - which Scoppetta denied.

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