

Chief must end division on force

The Gloucester Police Department is a house divided. That means low morale within the department and a lack of confidence in public safety on the streets of the city.

There is plenty of room for debate over the causes and blame for the unrest. And it should be the priority of all concerned, from Mayor John Bell to the City Council to Chief John Beaudette to the leadership of the police union, to end it.

But the primary responsibility for dealing with it lies with the chief. It is his job to manage the department and to provide the leadership to make it function as a team, no matter what the personal strains may be. Clearly, that is not happening as a bitter letter last week from the patrolmen's union leaders to this newspaper illustrates.

There has been tension in the department for some time over stalled labor negotiations - the union has been working without a contract now for four years. The lid came off that tension in recent months with the return to duty of Patrolman Stephen Lamberis. His 17 months of administrative leave for "a past record of poor judgment" has cost the city nearly \$175,000 in pay, benefits, a \$25,000 settlement payment, and the cost of filling shifts he would otherwise have worked.

And his return to work has not solved anything. Just weeks later, Lamberis filed four grievances over pay disputes and what he claims were punitive work assignments in violation of the union contract.

Beaudette said two of the grievances were irrelevant since they were resolved by the settlement payment to Lamberis and that the other two were without merit.

The union disagrees, contending that Beaudette's "public criticism of the union's efforts to enforce written agreements has forced us to expose the city's expensive mistreatment of Officer Lamberis."

The union is certainly correct that it has been very expensive. And it has good reason to call Lamberis' 17-month suspension "mistreatment." In that conflict, the city lost, and lost big. Lamberis collected all of his pay and benefits plus a \$25,000 reward for nearly a year and a half of vacation.

So it would behoove Beaudette and those who oversee him - the mayor and City Council - to be very careful about what they say has merit and what does not.

It would also behoove them to follow the contract to the letter. Yes, it is clogged with suffocating work rules and unaffordable gravy. But the place to change it is at the negotiating table, not by trying to work around it and provoking more grievances. All that does is lead to yet more legal fees, more ill will and even lower morale.

Finally, Beaudette has to communicate with his subordinates. Under recent questioning from city councilors, the chief acknowledged that several weeks after Lamberis returned to work, he had not spoken to him.

No wonder the department is divided. The chief must be the leader in ending that division.