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Fire union gives back money; As much as \$250,000 could help keep stations open full time

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For the first time in the six years of John Bell's mayoral tenure, a municipal union has agreed to make financial concessions to help the city through its hard times.

That decision - a give-back of as much as \$250,000 by firefighters - was announced last week.

The offer came hours after city attorney Linda Lowe advised City Council it could nullify union contracts by refusing to pay their salary provisions.

The two labor-management developments - one strategic, one legal - threw into uncertainty the future of signed but unfunded contracts between the city and its two police unions.

With deliberations winding down to the June 30 midnight deadline for a municipal budget, city councilors were looking for money to limit the loss of teachers and school employees and seeking financial concessions from the city's unions, particularly those representing police officers and patrolmen.

Funding raises for the two police contracts would take \$600,000, according to Council President James Destino.

On Tuesday, the council declined to vote the \$90,000 for one year of raises negotiated by Bell in the new pact with the 13-member Gloucester Superior Officer's Association.

The council advised Bell to return to the bargaining table to get concessions. Two days later Lowe issued the opinion that councilors sought.

"When a request for appropriation to fund a newly negotiated contract is made by the administration," she wrote, "the council may decline to approve the appropriation."

If it does so, she continued, "the city and union must begin to bargain again."

"This is what we were looking for," Destino said.

Clinton Carroll, president of the firefighters union, granted another wish of councilors Thursday night, as the Budget and Finance Committee was making votes on the \$75.6 million budget it was sending to the full council.

Carroll announced his union would forego an increase in minimum manning from 17 to 18 per shift so long as the city was willing to begin negotiations on a new pact.

All city contracts expire June 30. The firefighters are scheduled to begin negotiations today.

Chief Barry McKay said the give-back was a sacrifice of at least \$250,000 in salary and overtime. Instead of funding the additional shift position, McKay said the money could be strung out on smaller shifts to keep the Bay View and Magnolia stations open. The stations had been open intermittently since voters said no to a tax hike in 2004, though they have been open full time since October.

Even with the give-back, McKay said he doubted he had the money to maintain the three substations for 12 months.

McKay said Carroll "hasn't sold it yet" to his members. Carroll "went way out on a limb," the chief said.

The police contract funding request goes back to the council Wednesday night. A special meeting was ordered at the request of three councilors - retired career police officer Michael McLeod, John "Gus" Foote, and Sefatia Romeo.

"We're going to push for it as it stands," Bell said of the superior officers' contract.

The administration and the union reached agreement April 19 nearly four years after the previous pact expired. The contract gives the 13 sergeants and lieutenants a raise of nearly 7 percent, which includes retroactive pay that will cost \$90,000.

Destino has said he would try at Wednesday's special session to shift that amount into the School Department budget. As proposed by Bell, the schools would get \$34.4 million - \$1 million less than requested - and be forced to shed 44 teachers and staff.

Police Lt. John McCarthy said Friday he did not want to comment until the councilors vote.

Councilors Romeo, Bruce Tobey and Jason Grow urged the police officers to make financial concessions. Tobey said he was looking for concessions from the superiors' union of "real dollar value" and hoped the mayor would negotiate between now and Wednesday at 6 p.m., when the council will take up the contract again.

Specifically, Tobey asked about a possible cap on overtime in the contract and an end to sick-leave buyback.

"I would be much more favorably disposed to voting for the (contract appropriation) if there was a give-back of financial value," he said.

The annual cost to taxpayers for buying back unused sick time was estimated by personnel director Donna Leete at more than \$150,000, which would pay for more than 2,300 days at the contractual redemption rate of \$65 a day.

McLeod, the former interim police chief running for mayor, said that while he voted to return the contract to the mayor next week, he supports approving and funding the agreement as is.

"The executive branch negotiated in good faith," he said, referring to the mayor. "It took four years, but if he presents it, and if there's funding, we have an obligation to fund it. We can't negotiate. We may not like (the contract), but we can't negotiate."

The council's action on the superior officers' contract could have implications on how it treats the Gloucester Police Patrolmen's Association contract, a recently inked agreement for 48 patrolmen that will be presented to the council next month at the earliest.

Steven Magoon, Bell's chief of staff, said the \$271,000 required to give retroactive raises to the patrolmen is already accounted for in this year's budget. The contract's implication for increased personnel costs next year is \$221,000, said Police Department business manager Phil Terpos.

Patrolman Michael Williams Jr., a spokesman for and secretary of the patrolmen's union, said the patrolmen would be willing to sit down again with councilors and the mayor.

"We understand the situation and the City Council's concerns, and if they want another meeting at the bargaining table, we're certainly willing to entertain that as this process plays out," Williams said.