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Police contract finally settled, will expire soon; City, union must renegotiate in July

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Even though the city has reached a contract agreement with the police department's superior officers union after four years of negotiation, the parties will soon be back at the bargaining table. The newly signed contract - which is retroactive to 2003 - will expire on June 30.

The city will have to pay about \$90,000 to satisfy the new contract agreement, which was reached late last month. The city still has to reach an agreement with the patrolmen's union.

Once it does, it will probably also have to immediately start negotiations on a new pact because the patrolmen have been without a contract since 2002. State law limits the length of municipal contracts to no more than three years. The Gloucester Police Patrolmen's Association has been without a contract or pay raise since July 1, 2002. They are currently in arbitration with the city.

Where will the money come from?

The Gloucester Superior Officers Association and the city reached a consensus on a new agreement last month that provides retroactive pay increases totalling about 7 percent to the union's members. Mayor John Bell asked the City Council on May 1 to move \$90,238.95 from a surplus account built from property tax receipts that cover abatements, adjustments or appeals. The council may vote on the amount a week from today.

It covers the period starting July 1, 2003 through the present, but expires June 30, meaning the parties will have to return to the negotiating table soon.

Police Sgt. John McCarthy, president of the 13-member union that includes police sergeants and lieutenants, said the amount would not have been any more or less if the contract had been settled years ago.

"The big thing is it's on par with every other contract given out," McCarthy said yesterday. "To me it wouldn't have made any difference when they settled it. It would have been the same."

The administration had not intended to allow the contract to go so long without resolution.

"We all prefer to be operating under an existing contract," said Steven Magoon, Bell's chief of staff.

After several negotiating sessions between 2003 and 2006, the superior officers' union filed for arbitration Jan. 12 with the Massachusetts Joint Labor Management Commission. Meetings began in February. The union voted to accept terms April 19, and McCarthy and Magoon signed the agreement April 25.

#### New parking downtown

In addition, the superior officers' union agreed to move parking for the department's employees from the lot behind the police station, on the Rogers Street side, to the Fitz Henry Lane lot across Rogers Street. That agreement removes a legal impediment to a municipal project that would build a parking deck there that would add 29 spaces to the current 45.

Magoon said the city is working on getting state funding for the project and hopes to get design funds.

McCarthy said the superior officers' union asked that the parking change be negotiated through collective bargaining in December 2004 to use as leverage to speed a new contract.

"We've been able to hold them up because we selected to have this go through collective bargaining so they'd give us a contract," he said.

Magoon viewed the collective bargaining move as "an issue that would resolve itself" and did not believe it held up the project.

#### Superior officers' contract

According to the agreement, the union members have no pay increase from July 1, 2003, through June 30, 2005.

In retroactive pay, they receive hikes of:

- \* 1.75 percent starting July 1, 2005;
- \* 1.75 percent starting Jan. 1, 2006;
- \* 2 percent starting July 1, 2006;
- \* and 2 percent starting Jan. 1, 2007.

Also...

- \* a sergeant's base pay will rise from \$51,922.98 to \$56,003.33;
- \* and a lieutenant's base pay will rise from \$58,243.44 to \$62,735.91.

#### Mayoral perspectives

Gloucester is in an election year. The following are comments on the police contract from some of the candidates who have either taken out papers or are seriously considering running. Margaret "Maggie" Rosa, who took out candidate papers yesterday, did not return two phone messages seeking comment:

Mike McLeod

The at-large councilor and former interim police chief said the deal is a political and financial benefit to the city.

"When we get our bond rating, they look at (expired contracts) as unfunded liabilities. We need to have a good bond rating going forward. Four years without a contract, I can understand why it took so long, but when everybody else settled, I think we should have made this a priority."

Carolyn Kirk

Kirk, a School Committee member, said she could not speak to the specifics of the officers' contract because she has not been involved in the negotiating process but denounced the idea of retroactive raises, pointing to negotiations with Teamsters unions in the School Department that had gone two years without a contract.

"But on retroactive pay in general, I think we have to avoid getting into the position in the first place," she said. "When we were negotiating (with the Teamsters), I said, 'Every day that goes by is a day that your people are not getting their raise.' We held the line and settled with no retroactive pay. To then treat other groups differently causes a ripple effect where employees don't think they've been treated fairly, and in the end it diminishes our bargaining position."

Jeff Worthley

Potential candidate Jeff Worthley, a former city councilor and 2005 mayoral candidate, said the mayor should have money set aside to bargain with in the future.

"To keep the lump-sum retroactive issue from happening again, by having funding sources in advance, you can go to the table with some arrows in your quiver."