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Put an end to budget posturing

Enough of the posturing.

That is the label Gloucester at-large Councilor Michael McLeod put on this week's written threat to the City Council by police Chief John Beaudette to withhold police coverage at St. Peter's Fiesta if the council cuts his budget.

McLeod is one who ought to know. He is a longtime police officer and former interim chief of the department.

But there is nothing unusual about it. The threat is the same tactic used by other departments - if their budgets are threatened, their counter-threat is to cut the most popular, or high-profile, of their services. If the schools are running short of cash, the first thing they usually put on the chopping block is the most popular sports program. Next are teachers. It is hardly ever mid-level administrators.

For Beaudette, it is cutting police security details at St. Peter's Fiesta, while still keeping in place \$35,000 of overtime pay for optional elite training for events like a Columbine-style attack in the schools, even though the department already has nine of its officers trained in SWAT-team tactics. The chief did not specify whether he meant this year's Fiesta, which starts in a couple of weeks, or next year's, which would be part of the budget year now under deliberation.

Before the council, Beaudette also failed to mention that the Fiesta contributes \$5,000 toward police coverage of the event. The chief also said he would cut police coverage of local beaches and eliminate meter maids before he would cut the optional training overtime.

These games have got to stop. And it looks like this one will, at the mayor's office. Mayor John Bell has said there is "no way" he will allow Beaudette to withhold coverage of the fiesta.

But simply making the threat is an insult to councilors and the entire city. The financial trouble in Gloucester is very real, and it deserves the most serious attention that its leaders can give it, not games of political chicken.

Councilors are not out to cut the police budget out of spite. Politicians would much rather expand government than contract it. This is painful for them, too. They are trying to balance intense, competing needs with limited money.

If Beaudette cannot come up with a better way to preserve the most important public safety priorities while sharing in the pain that is being felt by all departments, perhaps he should turn his budget over to the council's Budget and Finance Committee.