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Oklahoma City union contract disputes continue

NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN CITY, PUBLIC SAFETY UNIONS DEAL WITH STAFFING, PAY

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Published: November 21, 2009

Oklahoma City police and fire union members this month rejected an offer that could have resulted in the hiring of more police officers and firefighters.

City officials are perplexed by the action because both unions have insisted during work contract negotiations and while campaigning against MAPS 3 that they need more personnel.

"I don't think their actions meet their words. It's all about money for them," said Ward 1 City Councilman Gary Marrs. "It is frustrating."

Despite publicly stating the need for more staffing, the unions have not submitted work contract offers to the city that address that staffing, city officials said. Instead, most of the offers deal with benefits and pay.

On Nov. 6, the city offered the unions a deal to fund 20 new police officers and 10 new firefighters with MAPS 3 use tax money. The city also offered to hire seven additional police officers with a federal grant, according to the offer, which was released by the city this week.

Members of both unions rejected the offer.

"It's like putting a Band-Aid on a gushing, bleeding chest wound," said Gil Hensley, president of Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 123. "We don't think that's a solution."

Hensley said 277 more police officers are needed to fix staffing problems. At least 50 more firefighters also are needed, said Phil Sipe, president of International Association of Firefighters Local 157.

Both unions are now in arbitration with the city regarding work contracts. The unions are also campaigning against MAPS 3 as a coalition called Not This Maps.

Sipe insists that campaign has nothing to do with the work contract dispute. City officials and MAPS 3 supporters don't believe him.

"This whole uproar of MAPS is really not about MAPS. It's really about leverage that the two unions are trying to create with the city (for contract negotiations)," said Roy Williams, president of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber, which is leading the Yes

For Maps campaign.

The police union's last best offer to the city would have taken an officer off the street to staff the union lodge. The offer also requested additional leave time for officers every month.

"Not a single one of their best and final offers do anything to enhance public safety," Williams said. "In fact, they actually detract from public safety."

Council members rejected the union's offer Tuesday.

Proposed funding source scrutinized

One reason union members rejected the city's last offer was concern about the condition — only if MAPS 3 passes — and funding — temporary MAPS 3 use tax money — for the proposed new hires.

In the past, city officials have avoided funding staff positions with temporary taxes because when the tax goes away, a new funding source must be found or the positions must be eliminated.

Use taxes are charged instead of sales taxes to businesses that buy items outside of Oklahoma City for use within the city. A use tax typically accompanies a voter-approved sales tax.

"Of course I have concerns about it," Marrs said. "It would be the first time we have taken a temporary tax and committed it for personnel use to hire people. With the times the way they are I think it's OK to do that, and we'll just have to, like everybody, hope the economy turns around."

The city's offer to the union admitted as much. It reads: "In general, it has been the City's policy to use one-time temporary revenue for one-time expenses, not for on-going operations. However, in this time of extraordinary economic distress, the city proposes the following."

Mayor Mick Cornett said the use tax plan is unorthodox, but could work.

"I would anticipate this being for a couple of years until the economy can rebound," Cornett said. "It's not a long-term solution, but it can help us ride out the tough period so we don't have to be like most other municipalities in the country and lay off positions."

Cornett said the city can begin paying for the positions out of its general fund when the use tax money runs out, assuming tax revenues improve.

Ward 4 Councilman Pete White said the city has only pledged to fund the positions out of the MAPS 3 use tax temporarily. Although Cornett said he intends to keep the positions funded permanently, White said he would never have supported creating the new positions if it was permanent.

"The people we hire won't go away because of turnover, but the positions may go away," White said.

The offer by the city also guaranteed no police officers or firefighters would be laid off for the next two years — if MAPS 3 passes.

Union members rejected the offer because it didn't "begin to scratch the surface" of solving personnel issues, especially if MAPS 3 fails, Sipe said.

"It's not very good long-range planning," Hensley said. "It was thrown together to try to buy us off temporarily."

All sides agreed that negotiations between the city and the unions this year have been disastrous.

"It is a train wreck," White said. "My 15-year-old granddaughter could have handled this better than it's been handled."

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