

Legal fund for cops' own uses targeted

By Josh Baugh

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The third week of negotiations between the police union and the city's negotiating team yielded little headway Monday as the two sides traded proposals on several elements they want — or don't want — in the next collective bargaining agreement.

The city's chief negotiators, attorneys Bettye Lynn and Jeff Londa, proposed eliminating city contributions to a legal fund that police officers and firefighters can use for personal matters, such as divorces and real estate transactions.

The city spends more than \$1.5 million a year on the fund, or \$32 per public safety employee per month. More than \$900,000 of that is contributed on behalf of police officers, Londa said.

“That fund is used for mostly family law or divorce-type things on behalf of the police officers,” he said. “Most employees of other employers pay those expenses themselves. We're recommending eliminating that.”

The two sides are negotiating a new contract that will dictate working conditions once the current contract expires Sept. 30. City Manager Sheryl Sculley has directed her negotiating team to claw back some of the rich benefits the union has bargained for over the past few decades. She has said that left unchecked, the cost of public safety would overrun the city's general fund by 2031.

Union officials disagree, however, and say they have no intention of driving the city off a cliff. They're fighting to maintain — or grow — what they earn in salary and benefits.

At a bargaining meeting last week, Londa and Lynn proposed significant reductions to a tuition reimbursement program that allows officers to recoup expenses for college classes. They proposed putting a \$1,000 cap on annual reimbursements and limiting the course work to job-related studies.

The city argued that many officers are being reimbursed for non-job-related education — from law degrees to course work in theology, exercise and sport, childhood studies, nursing, political science and air-conditioning repair.

Craig Deats, the labor attorney representing the police union, said he and his clients believe the vast majority of those academic areas relate to the job.

"I'm pretty surprised that you don't think a law degree would be related to law enforcement," he said to Londa.

The only academic area on the list that Deats agreed likely wasn't work-related was HVAC repair.

Setting the stage for next week's meeting, which will likely be dedicated solely to negotiating health care, Londa and Deats tussled over the city's proposal to remove health benefits from collective bargaining and place police officers on the same plan that civilians use.

Deats said he believes that doing so would cost officers, on average, \$5,000 or more annually. Currently, they pay no monthly premiums for themselves, their spouses or children and have minuscule deductibles and out-of-pocket maximums.

"They're asking officers to take no pay raises and agree to things that will take several thousand dollars out of their pockets," Deats said. "And we've been told there are other (economic) modifications they want to make."

Londa and Lynn said they're not recommending a salary increase, but it's not incumbent upon them to do so. The pair said they fully expect a proposal from Deats outlining future pay increases.

Union bosses have said that generally speaking, they expect pay raises to offset whatever new expenses they would face in health care. That's an expensive proposition, however. Salary increases also trigger larger contributions to pensions and prefunded retiree health care, among other things.

The city's negotiators said uniform employees have nearly twice as many dependents on their insurance plans as their civilian counterparts. Londa posited that even when spouses are employed and can get health insurance elsewhere, they choose not to because it's nearly free from the city.

Deats told the city's negotiation team that he believes they're "trying to create a disincentive" to push off a portion of uniform employees' dependents by making the plan less attractive. The city's civilian employees pay about 30 percent of their health care costs and face changes in their plans each year as the city reacts to the rising cost of health care.

"What you're talking about is a \$5,000 cut in pay for the police officers," Deats said. "And I'm just trying to get you to admit that."