

Boston City Council needs to hold the line on police contract

By Lawrence Harmon | GLOBE COLUMNIST OCTOBER 09, 2013

BOSTON CITY Council President Stephen Murphy wants to throw a pity party for his colleagues who are frustrated or upset by the need to vote up or down on a labor arbitrator's bloated contract award to the Boston Police Patrolmen's Association. Let's hope it's a small affair.

Bostonians respect their police officers and don't resent their average \$109,000 annual salaries, which include overtime and detail work. But residents also know that the city's long-term safety depends on extending the school day and increasing the number of pre-kindergarten seats. A new police contract that adds \$83 million over six years to the city's personnel budget squeezes out a lot of important work. And then there is the issue of basic fairness: The arbitrator's 25.4 percent raise for the police over six years is roughly double that received by 30 other city unions.

If a majority of the 13-member Council votes to nullify the arbitrator's award, then the patrol officers and city negotiators go back to the collective bargaining table, where they belong. Actually, the councilors don't even need to go on record with a vote. They could simply use back channel methods to inform the patrolmen that the contract puts too great a strain on the city budget. That's how councilors succeeded in bringing the city's firefighters back to the table in 2010 after they, too, received an inflated arbitrator's award.

But the spine of the council appears less steely today. Murphy, a seven-term councilor who sees political intrigue behind every precast colonnade in City Hall, believes that the "intransigence" of the Menino administration — not the stubbornness of the police union — is the source of the impasse.

"He [Menino] tangled up a ball of twine and dumped it in our lap," said Murphy. "We're being brought in for the second time in four years to clean up the [Menino administration's] mess."

Murphy is so miffed that he wants to require city negotiators to receive council approval before they can agree to enter into arbitration. But how would that help to resolve the current situation? It was the police union, not the Menino administration, that petitioned a state labor committee to take jurisdiction of the case.

At least there is no boo-hooing from at-large councilor and mayoral candidate John Connolly. He said he will reject the contract when it comes to a vote.

Some of the council challengers who made strong showings in last month's preliminary election are also showing political courage. Challenger Michelle Wu, who is trying to win one of two open at-large seats, said she has pored through the contract.

"The award sounds very expensive," said Wu. "I would lean toward a 'no' vote."

Another at-large challenger, Jeff Ross, said that he supports a healthy raise for police. But not this healthy. "I would vote to send it back for further negotiations," said Ross.

Some incumbents, meanwhile, are ducking. District Councilor Sal LaMattina of East Boston wants to "study" the matter. And at-large Councilor Ayanna Pressley called the situation "daunting" with "compelling issues on both sides."

The most intense thing going on here is the councilors' discomfort at getting caught in a tight political spot between the police and the taxpayers. But that's part of the job they ran for. The councilors are the last line of defense against overly generous arbitration awards. And they have served in that role since 1987, when the state Legislature granted the power to appropriating bodies, such as city councils, to reject or modify arbitration awards to police and firefighters. Since 2004, elected officials in Worcester, Holbrook, Somerville, and Northampton have stood up to arbitrators. Boston's councilors need to show some backbone, too.

On Wednesday, Murphy is expected to set a date for a council hearing on the police contract. But the basic facts are already known. The city offered a reasonable wage increase of about 19 percent over six years. The police wanted about 30 percent over the same period. The arbitrator split the difference. But this outcome isn't Solomonic. It's expensive — too much so. And the damage will be compounded when other public safety unions hold out for arbitration to get a similar deal.

Boston city councilors often complain that they have precious few duties that really make a difference in the operation of the city. Suddenly one arises, and they go wobbly in the knees.

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