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Group sees 'sweetheart' deals in fire contract

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A group led by Omaha businessmen is taking aim at the current Omaha firefighters' labor contract, saying it's filled with "sweetheart" deals that tie management's hands. The group, called Omaha Alliance for the Private Sector, has scheduled a press conference for today.

The businessmen will call on Mayor Jim Suttle to appoint an attorney with no ties to the city or the union to oversee negotiations for a **new** contract.

They also say the people currently representing the city in negotiations have too many ties to past labor contracts or to the firefighters' union and should be removed.

Suttle dismissed both ideas Tuesday.

Omaha **Fire Chief Mike McDonnell** is a former union president. He is not a member of the city's negotiating team. Instead, the **Fire** Department is represented by Assistant **Fire Chief** Joe Gibilisco, who served as union secretary under **McDonnell**.

Tom Marfisi also represents the city. As the city's director of human resources, Marfisi was involved in city contracts for more than two decades.

On Tuesday, Suttle named a replacement for Marfisi as director of human resources but said Marfisi would continue to handle the city's labor negotiations.

The business group wants both men removed from the negotiating team.

"We're calling for the mayor to appoint an independent negotiator. We

don't want anyone who had their fingers (on past contracts) representing Omaha's taxpayers," said David Nabity, one of the group's founders.

Suttle rejected the group's requests, declining to either remove the men from the team or start over on contract negotiations. He said other people on the city's negotiating team bring a "fresh perspective."

Steve Oltmans, Suttle's **chief** of staff, is a member of the negotiating team. So is City Finance Director Pam Spaccarotella. Both are **new** to City Hall.

Suttle said it was too late to start over on contract negotiations, which have been ongoing for several months. "We're too far down the line," said Ron Gerard, Suttle's spokesman.

Steve LeClair, president of the firefighters' union, could not be reached for comment.

Nabity and his group say it's not too late to start negotiations from scratch.

Nabity is a former Republican candidate for governor who lost to Dave Heineman in the 2006 GOP primary.

A financial adviser, Nabity said he and others formed the group last summer to serve as a watchdog over government spending.

Nabity said about 25 people are involved in the group.

The group's officers: President **Mike** Simmonds, chairman of Simmonds Restaurant Management; Vice President George Venteicher, a real estate developer; and Secretary Rick Bettger, president of the House of Mufflers & Brakes. Nabity is the group's treasurer.

Earlier this year, the group worked to repeal an ordinance that required four firefighters to serve on each firetruck. The City Council repealed the ordinance, but the rule remains a part of the firefighters' contract.

Bettger and Nabity said that this time, their focus is on the contract, which they say is overly generous to firefighters.

For example, they took exception to a provision in the health insurance plan that provides Lasik eye surgery for firefighters and their family members. Most insurance companies no longer provide that benefit, Nabity said.

They also objected to the health insurance deductible of \$150 for individuals and \$300 for families. Most people in the private sector pay substantially higher deductibles, Nabity said.

Nabity said an outside negotiator could save the city \$7 million, although he was not ready to detail exactly where those savings could be found.

The group said the **fire** contract is cumbersome and ties management's hands by dictating how work shifts should be arranged, how many battalion **chiefs** must be assigned for each work shift and how many captains must be assigned to each **fire** unit.

"It's not left up to management discretion," said Nabity.

The Omaha **fire** contract has about 170 pages.

By comparison, Nabity said, in Des Moines' the **fire** contract has 32 pages; in Lincoln, 55 pages; and in St. Paul, Minn., 34 pages.

Des Moines, Lincoln and St. Paul are three of the cities that the Nebraska Commission of Industrial Relations uses as comparison cities when reviewing the city's contract.

The commission has been designated by state law as the final arbiter of union contracts involving public employees in Nebraska.

Omaha's three other comparison cities are Cincinnati; Madison, Wis.; and Milwaukee.

The Cincinnati and Milwaukee contracts were closer in size to the Omaha contract, in part, because all three contracts contain details of health insurance programs.

The Cincinnati **fire** contract has 133 pages, while the Milwaukee contract has 117 pages. The **fire** contract in Madison has 57 pages.

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