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FIRE-UNION RULING A \$7 million headache

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Omaha, like many cities across the nation, faces painful budgetary headaches due to obligations to public-sector unions. That headache was throbbing anew this week after the **state** Commission of Industrial Relations ruled that, within the next 90 days, **Omaha** has to pay firefighter raises for 2009.

The ruling also knocks the feet out from under the Suttle administration's contract negotiations with the **fire** union. The union had made tentative concessions on health coverage, postponing a recruiting class and possible reductions of staff on pumpers. Those concessions, which evidently will be withdrawn now, were critical to meeting the city budget approved last year.

In all, the CIR's decision will mean a projected \$7 million shortfall in the current city budget.

This situation shows, first of all, the need to adjust the law governing the CIR. In fact, reforming the CIR will be one of the major tasks before the Nebraska Legislature this session.

Look at what a remarkable and troubling problem the CIR just created for **Omaha**. The city had received significant concessions from the **fire** union, and negotiations were continuing despite the difficulties. Then the CIR comes charging in. The result: The entire negotiating process is short-circuited for the time being, and the city's budget suddenly is hemorrhaging due to a \$7 million shortfall.

This situation demonstrates how current **state** law governing the CIR is unbalanced and has resulted in **Omaha's** being saddled with unaffordable burdens.

For contract negotiations to succeed, both sides need to act responsibly. For years, city leaders have paid too little attention to getting salary and pension obligations on a financially sustainable path.

Yes, it's legitimate for government unions to stand up for their own interests. But the **fire** union also needs to be wide awake to the public's exasperation over this situation, and it needs to be amenable to offering reasonable concessions.

The Suttle administration and the City Council, for their part, need to be firm in pressing the city's case. But the public needs to understand that, by law, the city can't dictate to the unions on contract matters. On the contrary, any contract has to be approved by the union members themselves. That's why it's called collective bargaining.

At the same time, the city should keep up the pressure on the **Fire Department** for efficiencies, given that the **department** was woefully over budget for much of last year and, worst of all, was blasted in October by the **State Auditor's** Office for shoddy bookkeeping on payroll matters.

The Suttle administration has taken various steps to rein in costs. Those steps include reducing 16 firefighter positions through attrition, taking **fire** trucks out of service, eliminating all civilian staff, closing a **fire** station and hiring an accountant whose main duty is to look for ways to cut **fire** costs. Much more needs to be done.

This budgetary headache won't go away on its own. The remedy lies in three things: A sensible reworking of **state** law for the CIR. Responsible contract negotiations by both sides. And stepped-up, common-sense budget efficiencies by the **Fire Department**.

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