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### **Job-bidding process for police proves to be problematic, costly**

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Editorial

It is really no surprise that the Omaha Police Union recently sued to block Chief Thomas Warren's groundbreaking attempt to more evenly integrate a group of 30 probationary police officers throughout the city rather than cluster them in the eastern precincts, where they customarily end up. After all, the union is by definition self-interested and objects to any tampering with the so-called "bid board," even if those changes would improve the overall department or enhance the delivery of services to the entire community.

Internal problems lie within this technical-sounding dispute over who "bids" or is placed first in work shifts. The consequences of these problems may negatively impact this community.

Yet whenever we hear any discussion about the union contract, we seldom see the interests of the community represented or learn of the real costs of the matters being debated. The current bid-board dispute perfectly illustrates this point.

Faced with a younger and less experienced department than any seen in probably 25 years, Chief Warren hoped to place probationary officers throughout the entire community to more evenly distribute the cost of these inexperienced officers. (Data collected by the Auditor's Office revealed that officers with one year to three years of experience were connected to more than 50 percent of the complaints filed by residents.)

These probationary officers would be placed citywide before "bids" were opened, thereby reducing the slots more senior officers could choose from.

Needless to say, the union objected to any change in any benefit that

inured to its more senior members, no matter what it costs in training and mentoring the younger officers, the department in management control or the community in services.

Arguing in favor of "seniority trumps all," the union blithely relies on the tired "we've always done it this way" argument to support its position : as if the 36-year history of the bid board alone equals success.

Indeed, many departments have moved away from the bid board, relying on the more effective use of crime statistics and other criteria to address personnel placement. The Omaha Police Department, on the other hand, has a history of ignoring the best-

practices approach adopted by smart policing organizations, and the bid board is no exception.

What is so objectionable about the continued use of the bid board in its current configuration is that this outdated practice hides a litany of disastrous unintended consequences. What follows is a list of the many complaints generated to the bid board by residents:

It doesn't take an organizational-management expert to know that if you have nearly half of your 800 employees changing shifts, crews and precincts twice a year, you are going to have a great deal of cost, confusion and disruption in services.

The public confusion caused by OPD's internal practices was confounding. In fact, the confusion and upset caused by the department's constant turnover was the source of complaint. Some had trouble finding their officer. If a relationship between the community and an officer was established, it was quickly destroyed by turnover. It is very difficult to community police in this environment.

In my view, one of OPD's biggest problems is its inability to manage problem officers. But the bid board enables problem officers to change shifts at the first sign of any trouble, making supervisory detection more difficult.

Management has little or no say in placing certain qualified or exceptional performing personnel where they may be best suited.

Officers with the most experience gravitate to the "easiest" shifts and-or shifts that allow for the most overtime.

Inexperienced officers are left in the most difficult shifts.

The union's response to these concerns is, basically, "all officers are created equal." You would have a very difficult time selling that

argument to the community that just saw a young officer get convicted of first-degree sexual assault for assaulting a prostitute or witnessed another young officer resign after Taser-ing a handcuffed suspect into unconsciousness.

Both of these incidents happened in the Northeast Precinct and involved young officers, causing the community to intuitively demand what other departments have learned: You cannot leave a high concentration of young, inexperienced officers clustered in demanding assignments without risking incidents like the above and-or incurring enormous liability.

If you add up all of these hidden costs and negative consequences, you begin to see the real expense of the bid board.

Contract-bargaining season is fast approaching. Residents concerned about how their public-safety dollars are really spent may want to take notice.

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