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Pension level typifies police union attitude

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Editorial

Although while serving as police auditor I had no statutory purview over matters of pay, pensions or benefits, I heard plenty of comments about how officers spiked their salaries. Still, after reading the April 4 editorial about the cost and frequency of spiking pensions, I was shocked. When it comes to administering the union contract, the Police Department and the union seldom consider the costs to the public.

Here are some examples: The union is fighting to get its free parking spaces back. Opposing the chief's efforts to evenly distribute probationary officers department-wide. Resisting any management review through the Global Positioning System. And rejecting the identification of specific officers when filling out the traffic-stop data cards. (Of course management wants to know where its employees are and what they are doing.)

Nowhere is the Omaha Police Union's approach more clearly illustrated than with retirement and overtime benefits. Who has ever heard of an employee retiring with a guaranteed income for life well above his base salary, on top of free individual and family health insurance for life?

Typically, the tipping point for public employee salary and benefit reform is when the government employee's salary and benefits approach or exceed the private sector's. But this is beyond the pale.

What's more, many of these police officers, pursuant to their current contract, retire quite early: some as young as 45 : at hefty pension levels. The World-Herald cited a case of one retired officer who is receiving a pension of about \$90,000 a year from a \$54,000-a-year job.

And there is nothing to stop this same officer from turning right around and getting another government job, collecting another taxpayer-funded salary and collecting another pension. That is hardly uncommon. Is it any wonder taxes are so high?

If any of our elected officials were looking out for the taxpayers' interests, don't you think we would have heard more from someone in the city government about the \$44 million run-up in overtime expenses? That amount is more than half the entire annual budget for all police salaries. Shouldn't we have a little something more to show for it?

The truth is that many of these elected officials count on the union's support when it comes time to run for office. This money and support make it very difficult to say no to this or any public employee union.

Is there another way? Of course there is. Cities across the country are finding better ways to manage their public safety costs while still retaining qualified personnel. While no two cities are exactly alike, some comparisons are useful.

For instance, the city I came from, Colorado Springs, Colo. (with a population of 370,000, compared with 409,000 in Omaha), actually has more police personnel (1,016, compared with Omaha's 948) while spending similar dollars (comparing 2005 budgets and statistics).

Colorado Springs, however, makes more cost-effective use of a greater number of civilian employees (327, compared with Omaha's 180), and fewer sworn officers: 689, compared with Omaha's 768.

Even so, the Colorado Springs Police Department answered a greater number of calls for service in 2005 (248,218) than did Omaha police (234,149).

In Colorado Springs, officers are well-trained and comfortably paid and receive a desirable but reasonable benefit package. Their retirement plan includes a defined pension benefit, but at a more modest 57 percent of an officer's highest three-year base salary plus longevity pay (no merit, bonus or overtime pay included). Retirement age is 55 if one has 25 years of service, and officers are not penalized if they work longer.

In Colorado Springs, performance pay is used to give extra rewards to department standouts. Cost-savings measures are sought, and department personnel who suggest cost savings can share in those savings. The department closely monitors its overtime use and works hard to keep those costs in check.

The department is open. (A "community room" is used for city-wide meetings.) It is accountable. (Annual surveys, annual reports and

customer feedback are standard operating procedure.) And it is transparent. (The department has an award-winning Web page keeping it connected to the community it serves.)

Oh, and one more thing: The Colorado Springs Police Department does not have a union.

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