

Lehigh County to cut pay ** A final vote on salaries, perks for nurses and supervisors is next week.

Morning Call - Allentown, Pa.

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Date: Dec 9, 2010

Start Page: A.5

Section: News

Text Word Count: 609

Document Text

Lehigh County commissioners' Republican majority could make good on their tough talk during this year's contentious budget process and eliminate pay raises and other perks for about 170 employees.

The workers -- 26 human services supervisors and 147 nurses at Cedarbrook nursing home -- are a relatively easy target because they belong to what are called "meet and discuss" bargaining units. Unlike members of traditional unions, these workers are bound by whatever provisions the county sets and cannot strike.

The cuts would save \$357,600 next year. All five Republicans on the nine-member board are sponsoring the changes and at least one Democrat indicated Wednesday night he may support the cuts as well. A final vote is set for Wednesday.

The measure is the first test of a nonbinding recommendation put forth by Commissioner Chairman Dean Browning to eliminate pay raises, step increases and longevity pay in union contracts.

"We are a labor-intensive organization, and if we're going to make a reduction in costs over time, the only place we have to go to is labor costs, our employees," Browning said. "This is what we expect of those new contracts, and we're starting with these employees."

Democrats Daniel McCarthy and David Jones questioned the need to reset compensation for the supervisors and nurses before the other union contracts are finalized. Democratic Commissioner Bill Hansell said he was undecided.

Contracts expire at the end of this year for hundreds of county workers in unions that have strike and arbitration powers. It remains to be seen how far Executive Don Cunningham's administration will take the commissioners' zero-increase recommendation before compromising with the unions.

Cunningham said before the meeting Wednesday that it's "unrealistic to think that one side is going to win every single provision in the contract."

In August the administration negotiated and commissioners approved a contract with deputy sheriffs that Cunningham said would set a benchmark for future deals. The contract was ratified before residents flocked to budget meetings to admonish elected officials for what they viewed as poor stewardship of tax dollars.

The three-year contract gives 43 full-time deputy sheriffs a 5 percent salary bump in the first year and 2.5 percent increases in the second and third years. For the first time, sheriffs will pay 20 percent of their health care costs, which offsets 2 percent of the wage increase and matches the amount that nonunion workers contribute.

Administration Director Tom Muller said the "meet and discuss" supervisors previously received 3.5 percent increases and 5 percent step increases. The cuts bring them in line with nonunion workers, who next year are slated for 2 percent or 3 percent increases, depending on where they fall on the pay scale.

The supervisors and nurses would also see their take-home pay drop with the elimination of longevity bonuses ranging from \$300 to \$2,000. Most of Cedarbrook's budget is covered by state and federal money, but Muller noted the savings will save county tax dollars.

Expecting enough union members to attend Wednesday night's meeting to protest, the commissioners moved a committee meeting addressing the matter to a larger room. The crowds did not materialize.

Carlos Rivera, an organizer for Service Employees International's health care division, said Tuesday that many registered and licensed practical nurses he represents will be hit with a 16 percent increase just like other Lehigh County residents. The county's goal of pay parity doesn't move him.

"It's not our problem if the county does not want to match what the unions are getting," he said. "Maybe the nonunion employees need a union to represent them."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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