

Library union president: Aldermen's committee shows no sense of give-and-take in contract negotiations

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Published: Sunday, Jul. 23, 2006

Good government requires moderation and compromise. The aldermanic budget review committee demonstrated Thursday, July 13, that it is interested in neither.

While one alderman conceded that both sides in the city's labor negotiations would have to give ground, the committee nevertheless voted unanimously to indefinitely postpone four contracts in which all sides did just that. The sticking point has been health care.

The unions agreed to increase their premium contribution and co-pays the second year of the contracts, in response to a \$1,000 "health care equalization" and a 3 percent pay raise offered by the city, beginning the second year of the contract.

The proposed contracts would set premiums for members in HMOs at 10 percent, up from 5 percent, and for those in a point of service arrangement at 20 percent, up from 15 percent.

There would be no pay raise the first year of the contract nor would there be a change in health insurance, thus neither the city nor the unions would receive any concessions the first year of the contract. In fact, implementing the negotiated changes does take some time and from a practical point of view would not be able to be implemented until July 1, 2007.

In the case of the Nashua Public Library employees contract, the only bargaining sessions of which I have first-hand knowledge, the city's negotiators certainly felt they had achieved everything the board of aldermen had asked of them. And our union was willing to forgo a raise the first year.

It should also be noted that the tentative agreement, while granting cost-of-living increases, withholds steps granted for years of service for the duration of the contract.

The budget review committee appears to want greater concessions from the unions and none from the city.

The principle of "status quo," a matter of state labor law, which states that until a new agreement is reached, both parties are bound by the conditions in place at the end of the previous agreement, was explained to them repeatedly at the meeting. So they cannot claim to be unaware that if these contracts are not approved, the city is legally obligated to maintain its current contribution to employees' health care.

The Streeter administration has taken a long-term approach toward addressing the city's health care costs, one which would save the city more money as health care costs rise, but they have conceded that the savings would not be immediate.

The budget review committee, in rejecting the contract proposals, has chosen a shortsighted approach in which nothing will change and things will only get worse for the city. Health-care costs are not going down in the foreseeable future.

But there's another side to this. Cost-benefit analysis has two parts, cost and benefit. Certain aldermen seem to look only at the money. They seem to be blind to the service we provide. They talk as if city employees are collecting a paycheck for doing little or no work.

I can only speak on the subject of the library. I have been with the library since January 2001, less than a year before it automated, and about a year and a half before we came under the direction of Joe Dionne.

I have personally witnessed not only the vast improvements in our services and huge, documented increases in our business, but also the enthusiasm and dedication with which my colleagues have striven to achieve these.

As a member of the technical services department, where we process and catalog books and media materials, I work mostly behind the scenes. But several months ago, I had the chance to train in the circulation department, where I gained a deeper appreciation of the professionalism and work ethic of the staff there, as well as the extent of its responsibility.

The library staff takes pride in its work. Its members understand that the citizens appreciate the importance of a really good public library to a city like Nashua, even if many of their elected officials do not.

I had hoped for a return to common sense with the election of the new aldermanic board last November. But if the budget review committee is representative of the full board, then this board of aldermen is as extreme in its conservatism as previous boards have been in their liberalism.

I have to wonder what the aldermen would consider an acceptable cost for the services of the employees whose contracts they rejected? Whether through ignorance of fair labor practice or complete disregard for it, they are putting our city at a real disadvantage.

Edmund Lowe is the President of the Nashua Public Library Employees Local 4831.