

Mayor Looking to Roll Back Health Care For Workers and Retirees

Posted: Monday, March 7, 2011 5:00 pm | Updated: 4:35 pm, Mon Mar 7, 2011.

By DAVID SIMS |

The Bloomberg administration Feb. 28 presented the Municipal Labor Committee with a list of health-benefit-reduction proposals including initiating employee contribution to plans, the eliminating of Medicare Part B reimbursements for retirees, and requiring 20 years of service to vest into retiree health benefits. MLC Chairman Harry Nespoli said union leaders remained adamantly opposed to the city's way of doing business.

The city has had two similar meetings with the MLC in recent weeks on pension changes and its plan to alter the Civil Service Law, and both times, MLC members complained that Labor Relations Commissioner James F. Hanley had simply presented them with a list of the city's goals and not engaged them in any meaningful discussion.

'Why Should We Cooperate?'

"When you go to two meetings in the last two months and they kick you in the head, say this is the way it's going to be, this is the way it's gotta be...there's an atmosphere at the table of, 'Why should we cooperate?'" Mr. Nespoli said in a phone interview. "That's what I reflected to Commissioner Hanley. But I've been around, so I'm not going to shut the door on any meetings; I'm going to sit down and try and turn it around."

The administration's list of "concepts" has five aims: to implement co-premiums on all basic plans, requiring employee contributions for the currently free Group Health Incorporated option; to establish co-payments and deductibles under the HIP-HMO plan; to eliminate Medicare Part B for all retirees; to eliminate the city's annual \$35-million contribution to the Health Insurance Stabilization Fund; and to require 20 years of credited service to have health benefits vest as a retiree.

The list is almost identical to one presented to the MLC exactly a year ago, on which no action was taken.

"Just two years ago, we did over \$400 million in health savings, and \$112 million ongoing forever, and he's looking for help now to try and generate more money from the unions," Mr. Nespoli said, referring to a deal struck between the MLC and the city in 2009. "I really don't know if there's anything at this bargaining table here because of what's going on."

'Unions Fairly Disgusted'

Mr. Nespoli has entreated the city to try and bargain fairly with unions rather than impose demands, but he said the Bloomberg administration had lost a lot of ground with its radical pension and civil-service proposals.

"He's trying to sit down and do something, but the way we've been treated, and what's still on the table from the last couple of meetings...I think what they should do is reconsider and sit down again and re-evaluate some of the things from the earlier meetings," he said. "Let's hope that it gets better. The body of unions at the table right now are fairly disgusted with what's going from City Hall right now with the Mayor."

District Council 37 Retirees Association President Stu Leibowitz said in a phone interview that the demands "are not inconsistent with where they've been coming from for the last few years. The Mayor wants to pick on retirees, whom he considers a very vulnerable part of the population. He feels he can afford to make an example of the retirees, and he's unfortunately informed by this hysterical climate that says retirees receive too much."

He added, "To single out this population, to me it's heartless and unfair. In order to do it he would have to change the city Administrative Code, because health benefits for retirees are not covered by collective bargaining."

All of the changes would require legislative action, either in the State Legislature or the City Council. Mr. Hanley did not return calls for comment on the negotiations.

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