

### *3 percent pay raise authorized*

## **Police Union contract settled, allows for part-time officers**

**By Beth Church**

Rossford City Council has approved contracts with the two city police unions, authorizing a 3 percent pay raise and allowing part-time officers to be added to the force.

Contracts with the Ohio Patrolmen's Benevolent Association (OPBA) for the command officers and patrol officers had expired December 31, 2006, and since then, union members and city officials have been in extended, tense negotiations.

"At long last, this contract is before council," City Administrator Ed Ciecka said at the October 27 council meeting.

The Contracts grant a 3 percent retroactive salary increase to the officers for each of the three years of the contract.

Several council members expressed their dissatisfaction although they were required by state bargaining laws to accept the agreements.

"I'm very, very disappointed in the arbitrator's findings," Council President Larry Oberdorf said. "After lengthy negotiations, why even go to this point if there's going to be a total acceptance of the other side? We spent a considerable amount of money on legal fees in this."

When an agreement could not be reached by September 2007, a fact-finder was appointed by the State Employee Relations Board to hear both sides of the discussion.

Both OPBA units voted to accept the fact-finder's report. However, in April, when council rejected the fact-finder's report, the process moved to final and binding arbitration.

Binding arbitration is the last course of action because - unlike other unionized workers - police officers cannot go on strike.

Thomas Skulina was appointed by SERB to hear the case, and his arbitrator's report was released to the city and union officials on July 17.

Mr. Skulina's report was based on a June 26 arbitration meeting and covered nine issues including wages, meal allowance, minimum manpower, sick leave, funeral leave, performance allowance and residency.

"We spent a lot of time, a lot of effort on it," Mayor Bill Verbosky said, adding that he was disappointed that the process took so long.

After the council meeting, Officer Glenn Goss, director for the Rossford unit of the OPBA, described his reaction to the final contracts as "bitter-sweet."

"The members are glad that the contract is in hand and glad to have received at least a 3 percent annual raise rather than the 1 percent that was offered by the city," he said.

"[However] there is a feeling within the police department that the administration of the city does not appreciate nor respect the police. Morale is at an all-time low, and it directly relates to the treatment of police employees. The drawn out, 24-month negotiation process is simply one example," Officer Goss added. "There was absolutely no reason for negotiations between a small town like Rossford and 12 officers to take so long."

Mr Ciecka noted that the addition to the contracts of hiring part-time officers will be a benefit to the city.

"Like every agreement, we're not totally happy with it, but we saw some positives, too," he said. "This will allow us to hire and utilize part-time officers for the first time."

The contracts also exclude the D.A.R.E. officer and other special assignment officers from being counted as part of the minimum staffing for each shift.

Officers have been concerned about the minimum staffing of their department, questioning why Rossford now has only 12 officers when, in the mid-1990's, the department had 18 officers.

Residents overflowed council chambers at several meetings this summer complaining about vandalism, drug dealing, gang activity and juvenile delinquency around town, and asking for additional police officers to be hired.

Officer Goss said union members are concerned about the addition of part-time staff officers.

"Having a part-time employee to supplement our shortage of manpower and to assure current

employees can enjoy a day off without it being denied is a positive way to look at the issue," Officer Goss said. "But replacing one third of the department that was cut would be best for the safety of the city and officers. The need for part-time employees would not exist if we simply returned our manpower strength to where it once was." He also is concerned about retaining part-time officers who gain experience in Rossford and then leave for full-time positions with benefits elsewhere.

"Unfortunately, I foresee Rossford becoming a training ground for police officers as well as firefighters. Officers will work for Rossford until something more secure, with more pay and more benefits comes their way," Officer Goss explained.

With the salary increases granted by the contracts, Councilman Greg Marquette questioned how much back pay is owed to officers.

Mr. Ciecka said the total currently is being calculated by Finance Director Karen Freeman.

Mayor Verbosky added that funds equaling a 2 percent raise already were set aside in preparation for the contract to be finalized at the same amount of other unionized employees in the city.

Contracts with the city's three other labor unions were approved in 2007, granting annual 2 percent pay raises to employees.

Those contracts are with the IBEW Local 245 representing firefighters; AFCME Local 2954, which covers public works employees; and UAW Local 12, which represents various city departments including office staff and marina guards.

Mr. Ciecka noted that the city and police union officials are scheduled to return to the bargaining table in just nine months to begin discussions on the next contracts.

The new contracts run through December 2009.

Attorney Tim McCarthy was hired by council in 2006 to represent city officials during labor negotiations. As of March, council had spent \$56,000 in legal fees for his service.

Return to [MAIN PAGE](#) [NEWS PAGE](#) [NEWS ARCHIVES](#) [SITE MAP](#) [MAYOR RESPONSE TO THIS PAGE](#)

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