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Police union, city government dispute hurting morale, Rossford chief says

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Rossford Chief of Police Robert Vespi, Jr., says the ongoing battle between his department's police union and city government over wages and other union contract issues is negatively affecting the morale of the city's police officers.

"Morale is low," the chief said. "The guys want to settle their contract. Of course from the city's side, we want to settle the contract as quickly as possible too."

City Administrator Ed Ciecka said the two parties haven't spoken since the city rejected the conclusion of a state fact-finder's report several weeks ago.

"The mayor has expressed a desire for us to sit down and meet again to see if we can resolve any differences," Mr. Ciecka said.

The disagreement began more than a year ago when Rossford city officials sought to negotiate a 1 percent a year pay raise to mirror contracts found in similar-sized cities, according to a 2005 report from the state auditor's office.

"In that report, the state indicated there were some areas where the city was out of sync with comparable cities of its size and suggested making some adjustments in procedures and try to make some changes in its collective bargaining agreement," Mr. Ciecka said.

The Ohio Patrolman's Benevolent Association, which represents Rossford Police, sought a 4 percent a year raise, prompting the State Employment Relations Board to get involved, sending third-party negotiator David Pincus to try to mediate a resolution.

Mr. Pincus met with Rossford union and city officials in November, saying he would complete his fact-finding analysis in about 30 days.

But the review wasn't released until the end of March.

The disagreement was mainly about annual pay raises, but meal allowance, minimum manpower, severance pay, funeral leave, uniform allowance, and residency were also at issue.

The city wanted officers to receive a 1 percent wage increase at the end of each year from 2007 to 2009, locking in that pay rate for three to six years for patrol officers and three to five years for command officers to reduce personnel expenses.

The union wanted an increase of 4 percent each year.

In his nonbinding ruling, Mr. Pincus recommended a 3 percent wage increase as a compromise, but the city rejected it, hoping to renegotiate a better deal.

"They have a choice to accept or reject and the fact-finder has a choice to choose the union's position, the city's position, or come up with his own position," said Russ Keith, general counsel for the State Employment Relations Board.

As a result of the rejection, the state's next step would be to go forward with "conciliation."

"It's a binding arbitration," Mr. Keith said. "The parties will present their unresolved issues to the neutral [arbitrator] who will have to pick one side or the other on any unresolved issue."

Once it's begun, the process should last 30 to 45 days unless the parties agree to an extension. Chief Vespi said his officers are professionals and the negotiations haven't affected their performance. "They want their raises," he said. "I'm sure there's other items, but I can't speak for them."