

# Mayor responds to union director's comments following approval of new police contracts

Following the approval of new labor agreements for the two city police unions by Rossford City Council, Mayor Bill Verbosky has released the following statement:

"It has generally been my nature as both a past councilman and now as mayor, to let my accessibility and actions speak on my behalf. I feel, however, that some of the comments need to be addressed.

The statement that 'the administration of the City does not appreciate nor respect the police' is one to which I take personal offense. I have always had a deep and sincere respect not only for our police and fire departments, but for anyone involved in the public safety sector. To suggest otherwise is simply foolish.

On wages, Officer Goss mentions that the City offered 1 percent raise, which again needs to be clarified. The initial 1 percent was rejected early by the union. The City eventually offered a similar 2 percent to the police that the other three unions accepted, yet this was also rejected.

On the length of time for the negotiations to conclude, Officer Goss states that 'there was absolutely no reason for negotiations between a small town like Rossford and 12 police officers to take so long.' Actually, there were several reasons.

First, both the City and the police union, in good faith, attempted to adopt 12-hour work days as part of the contract. The police actually began working 12-hour days on a trial basis. When it became apparent that trying to integrate other parts of the contract into the 12-hour shift would not work out, emphasis on both sides switched back again to implementing a four-day on, two-day off schedule. This took five months.

Second, I could not, as Mayor, in fairness to the other

unions and administrative staff who were to receive 2 percent raises, agree to more for the police. The City felt compelled to let a third party decide this issue, which it did, and which we accepted.

Third, when it became evident we were at an impasse, the City promptly notified the State Employee Relations Board (SERB) of the situation. Unfortunately, the time it took to find a fact-finder, and have him meet with both parties, totaled five and one half months. Both parties had to wait an additional four months for the fact-finder to issue his verdict. Likewise, after the City rejected the fact-finder report, it took an additional three and one-half months for the conciliator to be appointed by SERB, meet with the parties, and issue his report, as well.

Lastly, the fact that current Police Chief Vespi has been serving an involuntary tour of military duty in the Middle East with his Guard unit while the negotiations were taking place certainly had an unintended impact on the process.

For all reasons given, one can see there were several events beyond the City's control that kept the process moving longer than we wished.

For Officer Goss to state that 'the drawn out 24-month negotiation process is simply one example' of the City's treatment toward the police was far more complicated than that, as most persons associated with the process would probably agree—especially with the fact-finder/conciliator process taking over 13 months to conclude.

On manpower, much has been made of the fact that, at one time, the City had 18 officers. What has not been mentioned is that this level was attained for a short period of time. The level was also attained, I believe due in large part from special grants to hire police officers. When the

grants stopped, manpower eventually dropped.

On part-time officers, Officer Goss states 'union members are concerned about the addition of part-time officers.' In the initial start of the negotiations, in fact, well before that, I was very clear in my position that the City was never looking to bust the union. The intention also was not to transform the department to one full of part-time officers. In today's economic times, practically every segment of society has part-time employees. The contract puts into place a limit of two people to help complement the force, wherever possible.

I again differ with Officer Goss' forecast of Rossford becoming a training ground for police officers and that 'officers will work for Rossford until something more secure with more pay and more benefits comes their way.'

While the idea of part-time officers in Rossford is a new concept, to date, the vast majority of officers who have worked for Rossford retired from the City. We also have officers currently working for Rossford who came to the City from other police departments. Those facts alone should stand on their own merit.

As Officer Goss has noted, Rossford is a small town. That also means we have an economic situation that matches. I tend to believe in this case of the glass being half full rather than half empty. For anyone looking to work in Rossford, he/she will look at all factors in considering to work here.

I'm somewhat perplexed then as to Officer Goss' public concern now on part-time officers, as he was one member of the union's negotiating team who agreed to this new provision of the contract as part of the mediation/fact-finding process.

My first term as mayor found the City having to deal

with a potential \$500,000-plus deficit that had to be addressed immediately. Hard fiscal decisions were made that crossed all department lines.

The City today is in much better shape than a few years ago, and we are constantly monitoring improvement needs as the City's financial position becomes more balanced.

The budget proposal before council for 2009 has an allowance for one additional full-time officer, with the potential for one part-time officer. It also includes the addition of two new police cars as an ongoing commitment to the department.

I love this city and have always worked hard on its behalf. For anyone to suggest, or imply, that my administration's treatment towards the police has directly in itself driven it to an all-time low in morale is an issue that I will strongly debate. I have publicly stated many times that I'm willing to meet one-on-one with any City employee at anytime to discuss any areas of concern.

My personal commitment to Rossford, and the commitment of those in my administration, is one that I take very seriously. The belief that I needed to defend both at this time is the reason I felt compelled to write this letter even though I took no pleasure in doing so."

Council approved contracts October 27 with the two 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 had been in extended, tense negotiations.

The new contracts run through December 2009.