

Fire chief: Keep attorneys out of labor relationship

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Yuma's fire chief would rather keep attorneys out of the labor relationship between the city and its public servants, and instead enhance the communication process put in place last year.

"We've made some progress," Fire Chief Jack McArthur told the Yuma City Council during its work session Tuesday night, acknowledging that representatives for firefighters and police officers weren't always treated well.

"They deserve to be talked with," he said. "We need to take care of issues."

He would, however, prefer to stop short of a formal negotiation process called meet and confer that firefighters and police requested of the council during a briefing during the last work session.

"My recommendation is to go as far as we can talking to folks and listening to folks," he said. "We need to hear from these folks before the budget process to ensure they're getting fair compensation. But personally I would stop short of making this a very legal process. I think the more formal and legal we make the process ... everyone walks away mad."

City Administrator Mark Watson said he initiated an issues forum with employees a year ago before the preparation of the budget. He said 150 employees attended and he received nine pages of suggestions.

"That told me there are a lot of things out there organizations wanted looked at," he said, adding that many of them have already been acted on.

"The bottom line, I don't believe the proposed resolution (calling for a meet and confer contract) is necessary," he said, referring to it as a "softer and gentler modification" of collective bargaining.

"We have in place a process to address issues."

Yuma Police Chief Robby Robinson said he was concerned that if the council were to approve a meet and confer contract with the two organizations, the governing body would be subject to more influence from labor unions in the way it does business and in elections.

Speaking from personal experience as a police officer for 23 years, City Councilman Raul Mendoza said he's seen a great deal of improvement in the fire and police departments in recent years.

"We used to have to provide our own equipment," he said. "And training has improved. Maybe we haven't given the process enough time."