

Chandler asks feds to settle raise impasse with unions

by **Edythe Jensen** - Jun. 10, 2009 07:20 AM

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Chandler is calling in a federal mediator to settle impasses with its three labor unions over a planned freeze on merit pay raises.

City Council's unanimous vote to bring in the mediator came at a special meeting Tuesday after more than two hours of discussions before an overflow crowd of about 250 employees - mostly firefighters and police officers.

The council gave the mediation until June 25 - five days before the contracts expire - when members could meet again to break the impasse if a settlement isn't reached.

During the meeting, union leaders argued that freezing merit pay constitutes a broken promise that would hurt beginning workers at the low end of the pay scale. They did not object to the city's freeze on cost-of-living raise and suggested alternatives to the merit pay suspension like unpaid furloughs and cuts in paid holidays.

Unions represent 68 percent of the city's 1,676 employees. Chandler's 2004 voter-approved law that recognizes municipal labor unions, strikes are prohibited and the city council has the final say on contracts.

Tuesday's session was mostly cordial but police union leaders had harsh words for [City Manager Mark Pentz](#).

Calling Pentz the highest paid city manager outside Phoenix, Chandler Law Enforcement Association president Lombardo Robles accused him of bad faith negotiation tactics.

Association trustee Cassandra Cocking noted council members voted themselves pay raises, set aside millions for downtown redevelopment and are building "a spectacular [city hall](#)" as they turn down merit pay promised to police recruits.

Scott Wall, president of the Chandler chapter of United Phoenix Firefighters, pleaded for merit raises that he said would go to less than half the department and only the youngest members. He told the council his organization would "honor whatever decision you make."

Wall and Robles challenged figures that Pentz released in a memo to the council last week that show many city workers' paychecks have grown by more than 50 percent since 2004.

Pentz, whose annual salary is \$190,000 and includes a \$7,200 car allowance and \$19,000 in deferred compensation, said after the meeting that his counterparts in Peoria, Glendale, Mesa and Scottsdale are paid more.

City officials had offered a lump sum bonus payment equal to the merit raises, but the money would not be included in the workers' base salaries next year.

As part of that offer, the unions would have to agree to a "[fiscal crisis](#)" clause in their contracts that allow the city to reopen contract negotiations if revenues continue to drop. That offer was rejected.

Pentz said keeping permanent merit pay raises in next year's budget would cost \$1.3 million and increase future deficits.

Pentz rejected a union proposal for unpaid furloughs instead of the merit pay freeze because the city has already cut 116 jobs and furloughs would create "significant productivity issues."

However, Councilman Matt Orlando questioned Pentz' assessment and spoke in favor of furloughs.

[Councilman Jeff Weninger](#) said both sides should consider small salary cuts for all city employees to preserve the merit raises and make workers at every level share the burden.

According to city memos, employees at the top of their pay scale aren't eligible for merit raises