

*"We are the most valuable resource the town has." MIKE RUDOLPH
• GILBERT CHAPTER OF THE PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTERS OF ARIZONA*

Unions win voice in Gilbert pay bargaining

Restriction on 'meet and confer' in town salary, budget sessions being removed

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The Gilbert Town Council is adopting a policy to allow employee groups and unions to take part in salary negotiations.

The town is joining other area cities that in the past decade or more have begun to recognize the formerly restricted union groups, which are more and more being invited to the table for municipal budget negotiations.

"What it shows is that you value your employees, and you value your input into the organization," said Capt. Mike Rudolph, vice president of the Gilbert chapter of the Professional Fire Fighters of Arizona.

"We are the most valuable resource the town has. The important thing is, it doesn't take any authority away from Town Council."

On Aug. 21, the Town Council voted to repeal an ordinance approved in 1992 prohibiting "meet and confer," or meeting with union or employee groups, when planning salaries for upcoming budgets.

Councilman Dave Crozier, a former firefighter, said the town back then was forming its own fire department, and many accused town leaders of wanting to end Rural/Metro Fire Department's services to the area as a way to start a unionized force — causing officials to steer clear of the controversial subject of unions.

Since then, Rural/Metro has been unionized. Nearly 100 percent of Gilbert's firefighters are also in a union.

"Enough time has passed," Crozier said, "for the politics to die down."

Councilwoman Linda Abbott said the move was an important step toward allowing employees to have more say about their salary schedules and wages.

The town's ordinance had allowed employees to speak individually to town leaders, but restricted groups from having representatives speak on their behalf.

The old ordinance also restricted the town from allowing union dues to be deducted from paychecks, and stated that the town would "foster good working conditions."

Under a new ordinance being prepared by attorneys, the town will allow any employee group, be it a current union or a newly formed employee group, to sit at the table.

Other area cities already allow the meet-and-confer process with unions and employee groups. Phoenix has allowed employee leaders to join salary negotiations for about 25 years.

And, in 2004, Chandler also amended its charter to allow a formal meet-and-confer process.

Since then, several new employee groups have formed organizations to represent them in the process, including administrative, clerical and technical employees and, most recently, police sergeants, city spokesman Jim Phipps said.