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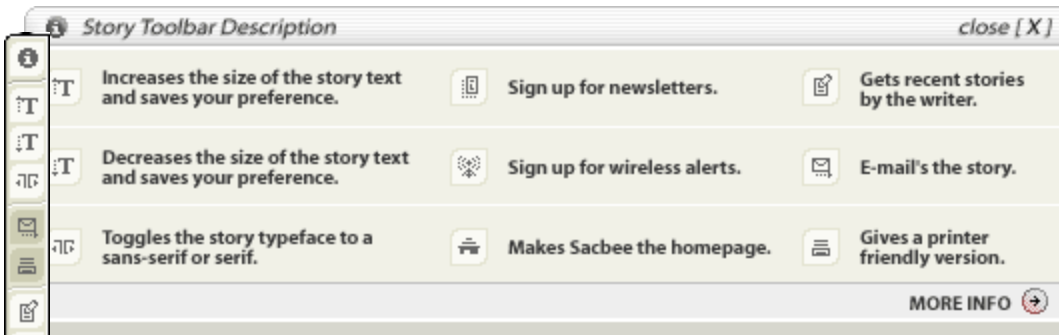
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Daniel Weintraub: Police reaching for even higher pension benefits

By Daniel Weintraub -- Bee Columnist
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Sometimes in the state Capitol, it is difficult to tell the cops from the robbers.

Perhaps that's too harsh. But there is no denying that California's law enforcement unions hold the Legislature in a death grip and are using their leverage to extract more and more generous pay and benefits from the taxpayers who employ them.

From the correctional officers who guard the prisons to your basic cop on the street, California's public safety establishment has never had more political power. Their union dues finance massive

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campaign contributions, and their endorsements give a leg-up to any aspiring legislator they back. The success of those candidates then allows the cycle to repeat itself as friendly legislators dole out still more benefits to their benefactors.

The latest largess is taking shape in SB 100 by Sen. Joe Dunn, D-Santa Ana. This bill would force cities and counties to pay police pensions equivalent to 100 percent of a law enforcement officer's final salary.

Historically in California, police and sheriff deputies and others who crowd under the public safety labor label have been given better pensions than the average government worker, to recognize the difficulty of the job, and the dangers and added stress that come with it.

The retirement benefits are designed to allow cops to retire earlier than others and in more comfort. For years the standard was "2 percent at 50" -- meaning that a police officer quitting at age 50 would get a pension equal to 2 percent of his final salary multiplied by the number of years he'd worked. A cop with 25 years on the books, for example, would get a retirement check equal to 50 percent of his final pay. And the pension would grow from there with each additional year of experience.

At the same time, a cap on those benefits was put in place to encourage law enforcement workers to retire at a relatively young age. Given the often physical nature of the work, this is not an old person's avocation. With a rule limiting pension payments to no more than 75 percent of final pay, cops seeking to build their retirement kitty had further incentive to retire early.

Those already sweet retirement benefits got even better in 1999. First, the Legislature passed a bill allowing an extraordinary increase in law enforcement retirement pay. Instead of 2 percent at 50, the new standard was set at 3 percent at 50. That change might sound innocuous. But it allowed a 50 percent increase in pensions overnight. Now a cop with 25 years' experience at age 50 could get a pension benefit equal to 75 percent of his final pay.

Along with that bill the Legislature passed another lifting the cap to 85 percent of final pay. A year later the cap was raised again, to 90 percent. Now the cap might go all the way to 100 percent of final pay.

The sponsors of this bill suggest that it would save taxpayers money. By lifting the cap, supporters say, we would encourage police officers to work an extra three years. That's three years during which they wouldn't be earning a pension. In most cases, the higher pension they eventually earn would not cost more over time than is saved by delaying their retirement for three years.

But that analysis has several holes in it. First, it assumes that every cop retires as soon as he runs up against the cap. In fact, many do not. And there are no savings at all, only added costs, for officers who would have worked longer even without the nicer benefits.

The calculation also ignores the greater salary costs the higher cap would bring about. An officer who retires at age 50 would normally be replaced by a rookie earning barely more than half the veteran's pay. If the vet works another three years, the city or county paying him loses that salary savings.

SB 100 was strongly opposed by the state association of counties and the League of Cities because of the additional costs it would impose on taxpayers while government budgets are already under intense pressure. Last week, the cities removed their opposition and took a neutral position on the measure.

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The cities changed their stance not because the measure had suddenly become palatable, but out of a desire to curry favor with the bill's sponsor, the Police Officer Research Association of California, an umbrella group of law enforcement labor unions. The cities want broader taxing authority and constitutional protection for the revenues they now receive. And in the power equation in Sacramento, the cops are key to any local government strategy to achieve those goals.

So now the law enforcement unions are not only writing the bills that increase their benefits and pressuring state lawmakers to approve them, they are also leaning on local officials to refrain from opposing these measures. This takes political arrogance to new heights. And if it continues, it might ultimately threaten the fiscal solvency of the very governments that employ the officers these unions represent.

About the Writer

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