

Ahead of layoffs, angst mars holiday in Spa City government

Published: Sunday, December 27, 2009

By ANDREW J. BERNSTEIN, The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — In less than a week, the city will see its first ever large-scale layoffs. Twenty-six full-time and 16 part-time employees will lose their jobs at midnight Dec. 31, bringing into action the outcome of a lengthy budget process that began in October of this year.

The layoffs will affect all five of the city's departments, although some will take a bigger hit than others. The Department of Public Safety will lose 16 positions, while the much smaller Finance Department will lose just one.

As the layoffs approached in the midst of the holiday season, tension in City Hall was palpable, with the departments facing the largest cuts looking to assign blame.

Commissioner of Public Safety Ron Kim, who will leave office Dec. 31 after losing his bid to unseat Mayor Scott Johnson, said morale in his department is at "rock bottom."

"When you basically go out and risk your life, having low morale is not a good thing," he said. "They know the budget. Even if we restore some people ... what does the future hold?"

Johnson's department will lose one full-time position entirely, while three others will either remain unfilled for at least part of 2010 or change to part-time. He said he had noticed less excitement about the holidays in City Hall.

"Certainly, no one is welcoming any layoffs," he said. "There certainly isn't the same level of excitement with the holidays, but this, along with everything else, will pass."

Johnson added that he thought layoffs could have been avoided, had the city's largest departments, Public Works and Public Safety, come up with alternate plans.

"It's also unfortunate that unions aren't taking a more proactive stance to try to save their jobs," he said.

Ed Lewis, president of the Saratoga Springs Police Protective and Benevolent Association, said morale was not good, and affected officers were looking for new jobs in the region.

"This affects everybody, but it's yet to be seen how this will affect police service," he said, adding that it would be up to the incoming commissioner of Public Safety Richard Wirth to determine how police service would be maintained with a smaller department.

Rather than looking to blame others, members of Local 343, the union representing the city's firefighters, said they feel disappointed that City Hall wasn't able to retain jobs.

"We're like a brotherhood there, we're like a family," said George Bull, a member of Local 343's public relations committee. "Morale isn't down; the feeling is more of a disappointment and frustration. (The City Council) knew this was coming for a long time, and they took the easy way out, we feel. They didn't look very hard or put much effort into

looking for other sources of funding or revenue.”

Commissioner of Finance Kenneth Ivins Jr. said he was hoping to rearrange budget lines in his department to save the one job slated to be eliminated, an information technology assistant who works for all of City Hall.

Anthony “Skip” Scirocco, addressing layoffs in his department, said there was no Christmas spirit in his department this year.

“Everyone is working together to try and find solutions to some of the problems,” he said.

Still, while Scirocco said the department would likely have to change how some services are delivered, he does expect that essential services will continue to be delivered.

“The people that are going to stay realize they have a job to do,” he said. “We will overcome this.”

To make sure that things like snow plowing continue uninterrupted, Scirocco said he had been meeting with the Downtown Business Association and Special Assessment District.

“I want them to know what to expect,” he said.

What the city can expect, Scirocco said, is a delay in services.

“We will get to everything, but people will have to be patient,” he said.

Tensions surrounding the layoffs boiled over once before Christmas, when failed communication between City Attorney Joe Scala and Scirocco resulted in an argument about who was responsible for delivering layoff letters to employees in DPW.

According to both Scala and Scirocco, a brief verbal exchange ended when Scala threw a packet of layoff letters at Scirocco, accidentally hitting him in the back of the head.

The task falls to the appointing authority, Scirocco in this case, but in delivering the first letters, the commissioner said he was being asked about comp time reimbursement and unemployment, among other things, that he was not prepared to answer.

Ordinarily, he could have turned to the city’s administrator of human resources, but the city has been without the position since earlier this year, when Marcy Brydges left to take a position with Saratoga County.

Scala was appointed by the mayor to serve as HR administrator in certain capacities, but not all. Scirocco said he asked for Scala’s help in this regard, but Scala said it isn’t his role.

“Unfortunately, when so many are losing their jobs, I would hope that our elected officials would take more responsibility for these employees, rather than trying to avoid that responsibility,” Scala said in an e-mailed statement.

Johnson said the incident between Scala and Scirocco was an unfortunate manifestation of the prevailing attitude in City Hall.

“There has been an effect on the staff and all of City Hall with the looming layoffs,” he said. While Commissioner Kim has made public calls for Scirocco to file criminal charges, Johnson downplayed the importance of such an action.

“Whatever did happen, it wasn’t an intentional act to injure the commissioner,” Johnson said. “It comes down to people

doing their respective jobs. I think it's unfortunate that DPW wanted to involve the city attorney in doing their dirty work."

While Ivins, who wrote the 2010 budget, blames the lost jobs on Gov. David Paterson's decision to take VLT revenue from the city, he cautioned that additional layoffs could be possible midway through 2010, if anticipated revenue from paid parking is not realized. The city budget includes \$1.35 million in parking revenue.

"There's also a bunch of people who don't want paid parking, which will mean more layoffs or a bigger tax increase," he said.