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Mayor warns Fire Department on skyrocketing overtime costs

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Oct. 6--Overtime costs in the Fire Department are skyrocketing, and Mayor Byron W. Brown suspects some disgruntled firefighters might be abusing sick leave.

If the city "gets sucked dry" by overtime, Brown warned Friday, it won't have enough money to negotiate new contracts that would include raises.

The same concerns surfaced earlier this week in the Police Department, when Brown's accountability panel discovered that police overtime continues to exceed budget. Police officials have just imposed new guidelines aimed at curbing overtime.

The Fire Department needs to take similar steps, said City Finance Commissioner Janet Penksa. If trends continue, she warned, fire overtime could soar \$5 million over budget this year.

Most of the overtime has been caused by minimum manpower rules in a department that has more than 30 job vacancies, Fire Commissioner Michael S. Lombardo said. But Lombardo acknowledged that use of sick time is way up, and he thinks "general discontent" is a factor.

"They've gone a long, long time without a raise, and they don't feel very appreciated right now," the commissioner said.

Firefighters have not received raises in nearly seven years, Lombardo added. "We've buried three firefighters since the firefighters have had a raise," he said.

Brown was quick to point out that his administration and union leaders negotiated a deal earlier this year that firefighters soundly rejected. The contract would have awarded them a series of annual raises, plus a \$5,000 increase to their base salaries.

The contract was rejected largely because many firefighters feared they would be hurt by proposed health insurance changes, Lombardo said.

Brown administration officials said they hope to negotiate long-term contracts with firefighters and all other unions, using increases in state aid to pay for raises. But with overtime costs in the Fire Department up 69 percent this year, the city's strategic planning director warned that raises might become unaffordable.

"At some point, you're going to spend your raise opportunities in overtime," said Timothy E. Wanamaker.

The use of sick time in the Fire Department increased by 32 percent in the first three months of the fiscal year. While Brown said some of it is legitimate, he raised concerns that other firefighters might be "playing games because they're dissatisfied."

"It sounds to me like there could in fact be sick leave abuse," Brown said.

Lombardo agreed, adding that four firefighters have recently been suspended and a fifth will face the same fate soon. The department is trying to vigorously enforce a rule that requires firefighters to be confined to their homes if they call in sick.

Fire union President Joseph E. Foley denied that firefighters are abusing sick leave.

"We have a smaller department doing more work than it did five years ago, and we're an older fire department," he said.

Foley criticized the mayor's first 21 months in office, claiming his inability to negotiate contracts with any union speaks to his leadership.

"He's been mayor for almost two years now. Name one achievement he's accomplished," he said.

"If the mayor wants to get into a public brawl, I would be more than happy to oblige," added Foley, who was a strong Brown supporter during the 2005 mayoral campaign.

In the longer term, fire officials hope that filling some vacancies will help slash overtime. The city will announce next week that it will administer a firefighters' exam March 22, the first such test since 1999.

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