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New Firefighters' Contract Not Expected Until 2010

Cost of firefighters' contract should reflect City's fiscal position

Writing about the status of the Boston firefighters' new contract proceedings is getting to be an annual event. In October 2008, the Research Bureau asked in an Update article, "When will the JLMC act on the Boston firefighters' contract?" A year later, the contract is in arbitration with sessions still scheduled in December. A final arbitration decision is not expected until early next year. Negotiations for this contract began a few months before the contract expired in June 2006, well over three years ago.

The state Joint Labor-Management Committee (JLMC) was established to resolve public safety disputes but in this contentious and highly politicized case, the process has been allowed to proceed at a slow pace as a consequence of the JLMC's unwillingness to force resolution with the two parties and delaying tactics by the firefighters union, Local 718, IAFF. The JLMC voted to take jurisdiction of the Boston case on February 7, 2008. Over 20 months later, there are still 3 arbitration sessions scheduled in December. No sessions were scheduled in October or November due to scheduling conflicts.

The JLMC voted to move the Boston dispute to arbitration on May 8, 2008 but the first arbitration session was not held until May 11, 2009, a full year later. Currently, the last arbitration session is scheduled for December 11. It seems that Local 718's strategy is to push the arbitration process past the November 3rd election date to determine whether after the election the opportunity to

negotiate a new contract would be more favorable.

The next contract is expected to include random alcohol and drug testing. That probability raises questions of whether the firefighters will be paid extra for alcohol and drug testing and how much other contract language changes sought by the Menino Administration will be included in the final package. These issues include sick leave controls, a freeze on annual career awards (TCAP) and the same health insurance changes adopted by other unions. No rise in the firefighters' contribution to their health insurance premiums, as agreed to by other unions, has cost the City \$1.3M as of June 30. These reforms are overdue. No language changes have been made in the firefighters' contract in eight years due to expedited arbitration in 2004 and this contract delay.

The City's financial position is significantly less favorable now than it was in 2006 when negotiations started. The City's FY06 budget increased by \$119.3M or 6.2% with state aid increases of \$19.7M or 3.8%. In contrast, the FY10 budget decreased by \$26.3M or -1.1% and state aid was cut by \$94.3M or -18.7%. The City could face further local aid cuts this year but certainly will in fiscal 2011. If the cost of the final firefighters' contract does not reflect this fiscal reality, the Boston City Council should be prepared to reject the contract and force the parties to renegotiate a new one that has reforms and is affordable.