Written by Mark Jaeger
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Even without unions to deal with, trustees eye changes to pension program, employee handbook

The Village of Fredonia has no union employees, but the changing sentiment toward public employees that has been unfolding in Madison has had a ripple effect at Village Hall, too.

Village trustees had a lengthy discussion last week about how to deal with employee pension funding in the wake of the adoption of Gov. Scott Walker's budget-repair law.

Up until this point, the village has paid 11% of employee salaries into a defined contribution pension plan, even though it is not spelled out in a collective bargaining agreement.

Village officials are now considering changing the retirement program to a 401(k) plan.

Village President Joe Short told trustees other changes may come into play because the proposed state budget would reduce state aid to the village by more than $32,000 and another $9,000 if the state recycling grant is eliminated.

"That raises the question, 'What should the village be giving toward their pensions?'" Short asked.

He said opinions were divided as the Personnel Committee discussed the possibilities, so the pension question was brought to the full board.

This year, the village expects to make $33,000 in pension payments for employees who log more than 1,000 hours on the job.

Trustee Don Dohrwardt said the budget-repair law represents "a monumental change" in how government operates in the state.

"We are capped as far as property taxes are concerned and don't have any new construction other than maybe a garage," Dohrwardt said.

He proposed implementing a formula that would gradually reduce the amount the village matches toward employee pensions, starting with a 5-1/2% match in 2012 and going down to zero in 2015.

"If they don't want to invest in their own retirements, why should we?" Dohrwardt asked.

Short said a less stringent change might be more appropriate, insisting it is not fair for the village to put the entire loss of state aids on the backs of employees.

"This is only one piece of the puzzle. We still have to look at the total package," he said.

The pension question was referred back to the Personnel Committee.

The board did approve a revision to the employee handbook recommended by the committee that keeps tighter controls on employee work weeks.

Committee members were concerned that employees have been “banking” 30-minute unpaid lunch times during the week and taking off early on Fridays.

Public Works Director Al Neumann said the practice reflects the unpredictability of public works projects, adding he has been diligent in limiting overtime.

“We work a flexible schedule geared toward projects instead of the clock,” Neumann said.

“We make sure there is always someone around on Fridays. Taking flex-time off saves the village overtime and improves the quality of life of our employees. I have been looking out for the pocketbook of the village.”

The handbook revision specifies that lunch breaks “shall” be taken, rather than “may” be taken.

“We are just saying we would like the handbook to be followed,” Dohrwardt said.