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Taxpayer advocate: City gives workers too much time off : Lanny Ebenstein says some get 83 paid days off a year

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Lanny Ebenstein, president of the Santa Barbara County Taxpayers Association, is taking city officials to task for allowing city employees to receive what he calls outrageously bloated benefits and excessive paid time off.

Some city employees, he said, are eligible to take 83 paid days off from work a year -- or more than 16 weeks -- and are eligible to retire in their early to mid-50s with lifetime pensions of as much as \$50,000 to \$100,000. These perks enjoyed by city employees, he said, are being paid for by taxpayers.

Mr. Ebenstein's ire was compounded recently after contract negotiations with about 800 city service employees resulted in a 4 percent pay increase over a two-year period and an additional paid holiday on Cesar Chavez Day, bringing their total number of paid holidays to 10.

"The city has given away the store in recent years in employee negotiations," he said. "It's almost as if the unions were making the decisions rather than the City Council."

According to Mr. Ebenstein, in addition to being eligible to take 10 paid holidays off each year, city employees are eligible to take four paid days for personal leave, five paid days for bereavement leave and 12 paid days for sick leave. In addition to these 31 days, employees with 11 years of service are eligible to take 23 days of vacation. Employees who have worked for the city for 24 years or more are eligible to take 28 days of vacation. In addition to these possible 59 paid days off, many employees take two Fridays off each month, for a total of 24 paid Fridays off. This translates to 83 paid days off.

In addition, he said, employees are given about \$1,000 in medical, dental and vision benefits each month, and they are awarded stipends for such things as being bilingual and for having "career stability," he said. They are also given childcare assistance and life insurance in the amount of \$50,000, he said. Compounding the problem is the fact that employees are able to "sell back" up to 1 1/2 of their vacation days to the city and receive the equivalent amount in cash.

"At a time we're experiencing a budgetary shortfall, is that the best way to spend what probably comes to tens of millions of dollars?" he said.

The city, said Mr. Ebenstein, has twice as much income as it did 15 years ago, but instead of being able to put the excess income toward programs to help the public, the extra revenue is going toward city employees' benefits.

A proposed furlough that might affect a large number of employees to help balance the city's budget would further decrease the affected employees' work schedules by 13 days a year. Although the furloughed employees would lose about 5 percent of their salaries for not working on those 13 days, they will nearly make up the difference with the 4 percent incremental pay raise, he said. Benefits and paid time off given to employees in the private sector don't come close to comparing to the perks given to the city's employees, he said.

"(The city is) providing an extra benefit in every area," he said. "It's a real inequity."

Mr. Ebenstein said he believes the overly-generous benefits and paid time off is the result of council members kowtowing to the demands of the union that represents a large portion of city workers, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 620. The union, he said, makes campaign contributions to some of the councilmembers.

"To establish a system in which employees are able to have a workweek of 3 1/2 days, that's not right, and we hope the city will show leadership to change this," Mr. Ebenstein said.

For her part, Mayor Marty Blum said that the only thing that's "not right" about the scenario laid out by Mr. Ebenstein is that many of his statements are too broad-based and even downright erroneous.

While some employees may be eligible to take up to 83 days off, that only applies to employees who have worked for the city for a long time, she said. It's very rare for even a long-term employee to take the full 83 days off. Mr. Ebenstein's calculations, she said, are "worst-case scenario," and would only apply if the employee needs to go on bereavement leave, and needs to utilize all of his or her personal and sick days. In addition, firefighters and police officers aren't eligible to take as many days off.

Mr. Ebenstein's allusion to the 24 paid Fridays off each month is a misconception because employees work more hours on the other days of the week to make up for the hours they don't work every other Friday, the mayor said.

Comparing the working conditions of public and private employees, she said, is like comparing apples and oranges.

"Public servants are given less salaries and more benefits," she said. "That's just the way it is."

In addition, supervisors and managers aren't eligible to take the Cesar Chavez holiday off from work, she said.

The mayor also takes issue with Mr. Ebenstein's assessment that the city has twice as much income now than it did 15 years ago.

"I don't know where he thinks we're getting more revenue," she said. "I'd like to see those revenues."

Mayor Blum praised city employees for agreeing to the unpaid furlough (the amount of affected employees will be determined on April 15), and said she thinks "we achieved a fair contract."

Police and firefighters, she said, have shown their dedication to the city by not ruling out the possibility of delaying their negotiated 5 percent raise in July to help cut costs, and employees have agreed to stop selling back their vacation days to help the city trim its budget.

Mayor Blum takes particular issue with Mr. Ebenstein's allegation that councilmembers have "kowtowed" to the demands of the service employees union.

Although she has gotten campaign contributions from SEIU Local 620 in the past, as have some other councilmembers, those contributions have not affected her decisions regarding how to vote on employee contracts, she said, adding that it's legal, per the Fair Political Practices Act, for public figures to accept union campaign contributions.

Mayor Blum said that although she hasn't received contributions from police and firefighters unions, she has voted in favor of them receiving pay raises. In addition, she said, Councilwoman Iya Falcone didn't receive any money from the local union, but she still voted in favor of the employees' recent contract.

"I don't think the people of Santa Barbara would allow me to kowtow to one union," she said.

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