

Letter to the Editor

August 12 2011 4:43 PM

Dear Editor:

Getting the City's fiscal house in order is one of my greatest challenges as Mayor. I am continually committed to making the tough decisions necessary to solidify our future financially. Unpopular and painful decisions have been made to put our city back on a path to a solid financial footing and future prosperity. Solving our financial problems is an economic imperative and will not be solved without sacrifices at all levels.

Cities and states across America have debt so overwhelming that no amount of belt tightening can set things right immediately. Due to budget constraints over the past couple of years, hiring freezes, furlough days, and wage freezes have become commonplace. According to a July 2011 article in Governing Magazine, more than 300,000 state and local workers have lost their jobs in the last two years and another 450,000 may lose their jobs this year.

The current financial situation in the public sector maybe the biggest challenge public sector unions have ever faced. However, some people are painting these very employees as the culprit to all of our ills. This is simply untrue. Public safety pensions, post retirement benefits, healthcare costs, and other incentives have to be addressed and are a major part of the problem. If both parties sit at the table and bargain in good faith, the necessary solutions can be achieved without a race to the bottom in terms of benefits. While labor does comprise the largest share of the budget, in terms of wages and benefits, it is imperative they become part of the solution.

Collective bargaining is for both sides of the table to come away with something that benefits everyone, but this does not mean that both parties will get everything they want. I am proud to say at this time, three of the four unions representing employees of the City of Alton, Teamsters, AFSCME, and Firefighters, have accepted a three year wage freeze to save jobs, helped our financial health, and continue to work hard meeting community expectations. We sat at the table, put all of our cards out, and both sides negotiated in good faith. It was not all about layoffs, reducing benefits, and the other topics normally included in labor related negotiations, but about how we can move on as a community to help stabilize our budget and serve our citizens without raising taxes. These negotiations are not the tactics of uncooperative people, but employees who recognize that a fundamental restructuring of how we do business must be addressed.

We are moving forward as a city because of shared sacrifice. Shared sacrifice is the answer to easing the pain and ensuring continuity and efficiency in running city government. We will continue to take a balanced approach to all financial dealings, living within our means, and putting our community on a stronger footing for the future.

The citizens of Alton, union employees, and non-union employees are willing to work together for a common goal and should be commended.

Tom Hoechst, Mayor

City of Alton, Illinois

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