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Don't let council politics derail police

QUEST
OPINION



**COLE
FINEGAN**

2020 will not be remembered as anyone's favorite year. The madness of a presidential race is playing out amidst a global pandemic; there is racial unrest at a level not seen since 1968, and jobless claims at a level never anticipated by any economic

forecast. Our national dialogue gets nastier by the day.

As the national scene deteriorates, we need our local scene to be stable. We need Denver to stay strong. We need our city government to work effectively and to pull together. Over the past few decades, our city's leaders have made good decisions that turned us into one of the most attractive places to live in America.

Sadly, that united purpose and focus on getting things done is being undercut. Instead, we have some new political players on the scene who think imitating the mess in Washington is the recipe for personal success.

"Every City Council member looks in the mirror every day and sees the next mayor," is a timeless aphorism, and it appears that several council members are looking in their mirrors and focusing on politics rather than problem solving.

How so?

Let's use just one prime example: Study the proposed collective bargaining agreement between the city and the police since it touches every controversial subject listed above — racial strife, the pandemic, and our economic condition.

After weeks of negotiating, the city, working through Mayor Michael Hancock's team, and the police union, the Police Protective Association, recently agreed on a new bargaining agreement that would suspend salary increases for 2021, halt holiday pay provisions for 10 holidays, and reduce the city's annual contribution to the police Retiree Health Fund by \$360,000. Why would the police agree to this deal?

Maybe because they recognize the city faces a budget deficit of \$227 million due to the pandemic that has crushed businesses across Denver. Maybe because they recognize that many people in Denver are unhappy with the police



COURTESY OF THE CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER

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department's actions through the years, especially in their interactions with people of color. And maybe because they recognize that the city has a lot of problems to deal with, and this agreement shouldn't be one of them this year.

The agreement would save the city \$4.96 million next year, a reduction equal to a 3% cut in pay for police officers. This would align the officers with other city employees who have been forced to take eight unpaid "furlough" days during the past year. In turn for making this commitment, the city has made a conditional promise of a pay raise of 2.77% in a two-year contract, beginning in 2022. Sounds like a good deal for the taxpayers.

So what's the problem? City Council is scheduled to approve this agreement today — and now politics are coming into play. Councilwoman Candi CdeBaca, the only council member who has refused to take a single furlough day this year, has turned

approval of this agreement into a referendum on the police. This is the same council member who recently tried to replace the police department with a "Peace Department" and lost on a vote of 12-1.

Unfortunately, she now seems to have enticed several other council members into possibly a voting down the agreement as a way to "send a signal to the cops." And she has let her fellow members know that she, and her movement, will grade this vote as a litmus test on everyone's progressive credentials. This makes no sense and certainly is no way to run a city.

As then-Mayor John Hickenlooper's city attorney and chief of staff, I often did not see eye to eye with the police. We disagreed on many important issues, including a collective bargaining agreement that ultimately went to arbitration. In that instance, the city arbitrated (and won) because the police wanted to keep a pay raise when the rest of the city was suffering severe

budget cuts. That's not the case here.

In this case, in order to make a political statement, City Council seems poised to slap the police in the face. By voting against the agreement, and sending the package to binding arbitration (which the city could lose to the tune of several million dollars), the opponents are saying, "We want you, the police, to face the challenges of COVID-19, the extra burdens of safety on our streets, the chaos of the urban camps, the public abuse, and take a pay cut with no promise of a possible recovery in a year."

The city we all love has lots of problems. Police reform must happen, and we should be sure that we work relentlessly to improve how our police officers respond and do their jobs, fairly, for all of our citizens. We must hold the police, and all of our public servants, accountable.

But voting against this collective bargaining agreement, simply to make a political statement, will be wrong and it will hurt our city. In fact, that action runs counter to what has always made Denver so special: the city works and we get things done.

Time to take another look in the mirror and do the right thing.

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