

Rumours swirl over deal

'Cause For Discord'; Suggestion unions got 6% over three years

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Toronto councillors and a weary public were asking yesterday whether enduring the strike by city workers -- now entering its 38th day -- has been worth it if employees keep their banked sick time and get a 6% salary increase.

Workers vote on the deal today, and so far no one has released details.

Still, early word is that the city significantly sweetened the offer Mayor David Miller unveiled almost three weeks ago.

That offer proposed salary increases of 1% in 2009, 1% in 2010, 2% in 2011 and 3% in 2012 for a total of 7.2%. It also proposed buying out the banked sick time that employees can currently cash out at retirement, and replacing it with a sick-leave plan.

Now councillors are hearing about apparent wage hikes in the range of 6% over three years -- 1.75%, 2% and 3% -- and a choice for employees between hanging on to their banked sick time (without being able to rack up more) or a payout.

The Mayor said yesterday that is an arrangement other cities have used to "modernize" their benefits.

"When the former [city of] Etobicoke, when the city of Mississauga, when Peel Region dealt with this issue, it was dealt with in that way," he said.

The city's rationale for doing away with sick bank was to unburden the city of a \$250-million unfunded liability. Councillor Doug Holyday (Etobicoke Centre) said giving employees a choice only "minimizes" the liability. Does such an outcome justify nearly six weeks of dry swimming pools, cancelled ferry service and padlocked community centres?

Councillor Karen Stintz (Eglinton Lawrence) received a dozen emails by yesterday afternoon from constituents outraged at the prospect of banked sick time remaining and urging her to vote against ratification when council meets on Friday.

Councillor Chin Lee (Scarborough Rouge River) said he's hearing similar sentiments.

"I'm getting a lot of emails saying 'Stick to your guns. Don't give in to the unions in terms of the benefits they're getting.' The economic situation is bad and many people out there lost their jobs or have a lot of their income frozen or even reduced," he said. "People out there are suffering so we have to be cognizant of that and make sure that whatever we agree with to the unions is affordable to taxpayers."

Mark Ferguson, president of Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 416, representing 6,000 outdoor workers, said yesterday there were no winners and losers over the sick bank.

"We have to be clear. The sick bank is a bank of sick days that is essentially owned by employees and the employers; attempt to rob that sick bank or that asset from our membership was one that we could never agree to," he said.

"There has been, over the course of time, some back and forth, some give and take and we feel that we've reached a



Mark Blinch, Reuters

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settlement that is fair to all parties."

Councillor Case Ootes (Toronto Danforth) and members of the Responsible Government Group were seeking a sneak peek at the deal before Friday's council meeting to understand its financial implications.

"At this point, I'm simply speaking for myself. Based on what I've seen, if in fact there is a 6% increase over three years --I'm not sure what the details are in that respect -- I won't be supporting the proposal if that's what it is," he said.

Richard Majkot, executive director of the City of Toronto Administrative, Professional and Supervisory Association, said the non-union workers keeping the city running during the strike will be furious if unionized workers get a 6% wage hike when they were stripped of their cost-of-living increases and bonuses this year.

"That's going to cause a lot of discord in the city with non-union employees," Mr. Majkot said.

ahanes@nationalpost.com