

New AMEA Contract Should be Approved

By Senator Loren Leman

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As a legislator, I have reviewed several labor agreements and voted to approve new contracts. I have sometimes been critical of the process and increased costs. That's why I enjoy the opportunity to give credit where credit is due. Credit is due the Wuerch Administration and the union negotiators for the way they have handled contract negotiations for the Anchorage Municipal Employees Association.

AMEA is the bargaining unit that represents more than 500 municipal workers who fill some of the Municipality's most essential jobs. Public health nurses, engineers, accountants, planners and the support staff who help make the whole operation run are some of the workers AMEA represents.

This year, the Municipality and AMEA mutually decided to forego the usual rancorous negotiation process and instead sat down and talked about what was important to both of them. The process is called "interest-based bargaining." When they listened to each other, something quite remarkable happened: both parties shared concerns about recruitment and retention of municipal workers, albeit for different reasons.

The Municipality needs to deliver a quality service to its consumers, the public. To do that, it needs to retain employees who have been hired and trained to provide the service. Yet the annual turnover among this bargaining unit is nearly 21 percent. That means every fifth employee leaves municipal service each year. A turnover this high is disruptive to any operation. New employees must be continually recruited, and replacements trained and equipped to do their jobs. These are expensive operations.

The union was concerned about the same problem but for a different reason. Many of the AMEA employees were leaving municipal employment because they could be paid more by the state and private sector. They did not necessarily want to relocate.

In the Legislature this year, we addressed the challenge of increased competition for technical personnel in the state's Division of Oil and Gas and for nurses. After reviewing the facts, we made appropriations to adjust their compensation, enabling

the state to retain valuable, trained employees and help recruit future employees in those strained categories. During the last six years, we have been able to make these kinds of adjustments and approve new labor agreements, while still holding down the overall cost of government.

We rightfully expect a good return from our tax dollar. We also expect that public employees be compensated fairly. This new AMEA agreement helps achieve both. Because some vacated positions will not be refilled, the agreement will not cost taxpayers additional money. Municipal departments will also save money by having a more stable work force.

Interest-based bargaining worked this time--although it may not be the most appropriate method the next time the Administration and the unions sit down to bargain. I congratulate Mayor Wuerch and AMEA for working together constructively to forge a solution that makes sense and recommend approval of this agreement.

Senator Loren Leman (R-Anchorage) represents Northwest Anchorage and Elmendorf Air Force Base. He serves on the Senate Finance Committee and is the Senate Majority Leader.