

## City tries another pension fix

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, June 6, 2010

Baltimore City Council members will unveil another proposal tonight to try to solve one of the most contentious — and pressing — issues they face: reforming the police and fire pension system.

If they do not make major changes to the pension program in the next four weeks, the financially beleaguered city will be forced to pay \$65 million on top of the \$101 million that has been set aside for the plan.

Leaders of the police and firefighter unions, who view cuts to their retirement benefits as a contract violation, increased the pressure on city leaders last week when they filed a federal lawsuit contending that the city had been shortchanging the pension plan for nearly a decade.

Their suit includes a request that the court bar the city from "enacting, executing or enforcing improper and illegal legislation" that would chip away at their benefits.

Councilwoman Helen L. Holton says the bill she plans to introduce tonight is an improvement on legislation she proposed with Councilman William H. Cole IV in April.

"Our goal is the sustainability of the system," said Holton. "We have a responsibility to be fiscally responsible with taxpayer dollars."

While she is introducing the bill at tonight's council meeting on behalf of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's administration, Holton said she wrote much of it herself, working "day and night and weekends." She said it represents a compromise between the unions' demands and financial exigencies.

But union leaders refuse to budge on many aspects of the retirement plan.

"There are places where our hands are tied, but we are willing to make concessions on the things we can," said Bob Sledgeski, head of the firefighters' union. "We would be no better than the city if we agreed to break our members' contracts."

Cole, who is co-sponsoring the new bill, said the legal drama would not derail efforts to reshape the pension plan before the fiscal year ends June 30 and the city's payment comes due.