

Police, fire unions protest pension changes

Members cite higher contributions, longer service

By Christian Schaffer, *ABC Channel 2 News*, July 1, 2010

Baltimore City police officers and firefighters are taking to the streets with their complaints about changes to their pension system.

Thursday night, members of the police and fire unions held a protest outside a fund-raiser for City Councilman William Cole, who voted for those pension changes, which also went into effect on Thursday.

Police officers and firefighters will have to pay more out of their paychecks into the system. And many of them will have to wait 20 years before retiring with full benefits, instead of 15.

Chants at the protest at the Power Plant Live complex included, 'Support police and fire – Bill Cole's a liar.'

'We're just making a political statement, it's not personal, it's political, that police and fire have done their jobs, and city hall has turned their back on us,' said Det. Robert Cherry, president of FOP Lodge #3, which covers Baltimore City.

It's the most vocal sign yet that the police and fire unions don't accept the changes made to their pension systems by the mayor and city council.

'We gave them some alternatives that were realistic; they decided to turn their back on them. Maybe now their having second thoughts,' said Bob Sledgeski, president of the Baltimore City Fire Fighters union.

The unions have filed a lawsuit in federal court, hoping to stop the changes to their pension system. They're also upset because they believe council members enhanced their own pensions.

'They have no problem trying to feather their own beds, while at the same time cutting everybody else's benefits,' Sledgeski said.

The man whose fund-raiser was the target of the protest said that's not the case. 'Elected officials contributions would go up significantly, retirement age would go up, percentage of overall retirement would go down,' said Councilman William Cole, who represents the 11th District.

And he says the pension changes were needed -- to save the city more than \$60-million. He also says he supports police and firefighters, even though he called the protest 'disappointing.'

‘I suspect that this tactic just shows that they're willing to do anything to get a 20-year retirement, which frankly when we looked at it wasn't sustainable,’ Councilman Cole said.

There is no time-table for the federal judge's decision on the police and fire union's lawsuit. Union members say they will continue to protest at other city council events this summer.