

Police, firefighters protest pension changes at political fundraiser

Union members object to City Council bill

By Jessica Anderson, *The Baltimore Sun*, July 2, 2010

Holding signs that said "City Hall Has Turned Their Backs on Police and Firefighters," about two dozen police and firefighters union members protested the City Council's passage of a pension bill that took effect Thursday.

The union members wore shirts saying, "We Protect You. Help Protect Us," and yelled as local city and business leaders entered a fundraising event for Councilman Bill Cole at Luckie's Tavern on Market Place downtown. The new pension bill drastically alters the police and firefighter pension plan.

"We're here to show our displeasure with City Council for cutting our pension system when we provided a viable alternative," said David Cox, secretary-treasurer of Firefighters Local 734.

But council members contend the changes prevent financial disaster for the city. "The reality was the city is facing extremely challenging times. We needed to make the pension plan sustainable long-term," Cole said.

Under the new plan, benefit growth would be fixed at 1 percent of their income a year for officers younger than 65 and 2 percent annually for those older, and no longer be tied to the fund's performance. Employees' contributions would increase, and police officers would have to work 25 years instead of 20 before retiring with full benefits. The bill would make this rule apply not only to new hires, but to officers who have been with the department 15 or fewer years.

"There was nothing happy about that vote, but I made my decision," Cole said. "We had to make a change. There were different options. The Council chose one and the unions didn't like it," he said. "I feel strongly that we did what was necessary."

But police and firefighters said the new plan reneges on their union contracts, causing union leaders to file a federal lawsuit contending that the city has underfunded the pension for nearly a decade and that the changes violate their contracts.

"To not give a retiree a pay raise until 55, it's not fair," said Bob Sledgeski, president of the firefighters' union. "We've given out proposals and they discounted them," he said, adding that the plan also affects the families of officers and firefighters.

The unions said they will continue to protest at fundraising events for council members. "This is just the start. We're not stopping," said Robert Cherry, president of the Fraternal Order of Police.