

Oakland's new police contract is first step

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Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who won three presidential primary contests on Tuesday, wasn't the only politician who made a comeback this week. Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums did, too.

In fact, it was probably Dellums' most fruitful week since he took office more than a year ago.

On Tuesday, the Oakland City Council unanimously approved his request to spend \$7.7 million from a voter-approved tax to accelerate police recruitment and training. That was his biggest political win as mayor.

And for an encore, city officials on Wednesday announced that a two-year standoff with the Oakland Police Officers Association had ended with a tentative contract that slices out some expensive officer and union perks put in over the years.

In exchange for 4 percent annual raises for officers, the five-year agreement also gives the police chief two dozen management rights that were bargained away over the last 15 years - among them the right of police commanders to schedule officers as they see fit.

The contract agreement comes as Vallejo, 25 miles to the north, is making drastic reductions in police and fire salaries in a last-ditch effort to avoid a municipal bankruptcy filing.

Oakland Police Chief Wayne Tucker inherited a department run largely on past practices mired in side agreements that steered department policy.

"The contract had a broad past practices clause, and regardless of what was in the contract, those things were locked down and couldn't be changed for the life of the contract," said Jon Holtzman, the attorney representing the city in the labor negotiation.

"There were more than 20 of those side letters, approved by former chiefs and other city officials, but never approved by the council - and the department ran on these letters for years," he added.

Included among the side agreements were these gems: The city pays the salaries of the union president and vice president and provides a car for the union chief.

Few, if any, of the side deals had sunset clauses and were not negotiable benefits in contract talks, Holtzman said. It was so one-sided that police administrators literally did not have the authority to prevent any officer from working on a paid holiday, with overtime, whether the officer was scheduled to work or not.

New life for police chief

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For Oakland's top cop, the new contract breathes life into a job that Tucker said he has held in name only since taking over in 2005.

"I've always felt responsible (for running the department), whether I had the power or not," said Tucker.

He applauded the efforts of the City Council and praised Dellums for refusing to buckle to union demands this time around.

"Now we are able to reorganize units based on the functional need of the city as the key criterion and avoid a (union) grievance to prevent us from acting," Tucker said.

And chief among the management rights returned in the two-year labor battle is the administrative right to schedule officers, an issue that has been challenged by union officials in the past.

In recent history, the police officers union has used the past practices clauses to challenge any scheduling change it didn't like, leaving controversy in its wake.

Essential flexibility

For example: The union stalled for weeks a special deployment to address the problem of sideshows, illegal street car rallies that usually take place in the early morning hours at different locations.

Union officials demanded to meet and confer with city officials before making the change. That's simply unacceptable in a city of nearly 400,000 people with one of the most significant crime problems in the nation.

The new police contract is a decade overdue, but it finally provides city officials and the Police Department's top brass with the authority needed to aim the department and its sworn force at crime hot spots all over the city.

And with nearly 200 new recruits in some stage of the training academy pipeline by May, Tucker is confident the department can meet its goal of boosting the force by an additional 70 officers by year's end.

At the same time, the chief believes the new contract will slow the department's attrition rate of about five officers a month by providing veteran officers with salary increases that are generous for them, because they make higher base pay than rookie officers.

Still, Oakland is years - and tens of millions of dollars - from fielding a Police Department of adequate size for the city. But the hirings are a positive step in the journey.

If police officers and the City Council sign off on the tentative agreement in the coming days, the police chief and Oakland's elected leadership at City Hall have the resources and authority to make some key changes, and headway, in the war on street crime in the city.

Citizens have provided the funding, the city's leaders have provided the backbone and the union leaders have accepted a contract they say their members can live with.

Now it's time for the city to take the necessary steps to provide residents with the level of public safety we

can't live without.

Chip Johnson's column appears on Tuesdays and Fridays. E-mail him at chjohnson@sfchronicle.com.

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