

Labor battle brewing in Orlando over jobs, venues

Mark Schlueb | Sentinel Staff Writer
May 16, 2009

Labor unions fighting to avoid layoffs of Orlando police officers and firefighters are taking aim at some big targets: the Magic arena, performing-arts center and [Citrus Bowl](#) stadium.

Union leaders say there is plenty of money in the city's emergency reserve accounts — more than \$100 million — that could be used to avoid laying off 33 police officers and 46 firefighters. But, they claim, Mayor [Buddy Dyer](#)'s administration doesn't want to dip into the city's reserves because that would hurt the city's ability to finance the new community venues.

"Cops vs. the venues," Fraternal Order of Police labor chairman Sam Hoffman said. "That's what this boils down to."

City administrators strenuously deny that the \$1.1 billion plan for arts and sports facilities had anything to do with the announcement this week of a proposal to shed 342 positions — about two-thirds of them occupied — across the city work force. But they might have a tough time convincing taxpayers, many of whom were already skeptical of spending on the controversial venues.

Both public safety unions and the union that represents more than 1,000 white-collar workers are considering bringing their case straight to Orlando residents by going door to door, picketing City Hall and broadcasting radio ads.

Their message will be that fixing the \$40 million budget deficit boils down to a stark choice for residents: Sacrifice your personal safety — or tell the mayor to dip into emergency reserves.

"If you're not going to use your reserves on rainy days to save firefighters or police officers or any other city service, you should just give the money back to the citizens," fire union president Steve Clelland said.

Chief Financial Officer Rebecca Sutton said it's not that simple. The reserve accounts should be used only for one-time expenses, not ongoing operations, she said.

"If we used reserves, it would be a temporary solution. We'd be back here having this same conversation next year," she said.

The venues aren't being paid for with the same pot of money that keeps general city operations running; the facilities instead rely on hotel taxes, a downtown taxing district and private contributions. And though a new arena for the Magic is under construction, plans to build a downtown performing arts center and remodel the Citrus Bowl are on hold.

But at least \$10 million in general city money sits in a special reserve account for the venues.

Dyer's deficit-cutting proposal, which slashes spending by every city department by about 12 percent, is a worst-case scenario. The threatened layoffs are intended to put pressure on the unions to cut job losses by giving up wage increases and perhaps even accepting salary reductions.

"[Dyer] is trying to pit the police officers who would be laid off against the ones who would remain and receive a pay increase," Hoffman said.

Union leaders say they're willing to forgo raises to save jobs, but they aren't willing to completely ignore the three-year labor contracts the city signed in December. They say Dyer has the ability to back out of contracts — it's just an option he doesn't want to use.

State law allows the city to declare "financial urgency," which would force unions to the table and ultimately allow the City Council to impose new contract provisions.

City officials won't do it, though, because declaring "financial urgency" comes with a stigma that could make it more expensive to finance future projects.

"Financial urgency' brings into play a lot of ramifications from our credit evaluators, from those individuals who invest in our bonds, in the public's confidence in our ability to maintain our financial stability," Sutton said. "I don't think that's a message we want to send out to the public."

Both sides want the other to be the one to reopen contract negotiations.

"We'd rather not lay people off, and we'd rather not cram anything down," City Attorney Mayanne Downs said. "All we've ever said is we'd like to sit down and find an amicable resolution."

But for now, it's a stalemate.

Mark Schlueb can be reached at mschlueb@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5417.

[✉ E-mail](#)

[Share](#)