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Council approves contract with Town Hall employees

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TOLLAND — A unanimous Town Council on Tuesday approved a two-year union contract with Town Hall employees that's similar to the agreement rejected in February.

The revised deal carries a 2.75 percent wage increase in the fiscal year ending June 30 and includes a wage freeze in the coming year as well as a no-layoff clause, barring the town from cutting staff until July 2010.

"It was a difficult time for the council when this contract came up," Chairman Frederick Daniels said of the rejected deal, which carried a 2.75 percent wage increase for 2009-10.

He thanked all town employees who have come forward to help save the town money and said, "we hope there will be more."

The council rejected the original contract by a 6-1 vote during its Feb. 10 meeting along with a three-year union contract for local firefighters, citing a desire to restrict those contracts to one year.

When asked about that, Daniels said the one-year deals the council sought referred to the current fiscal year, in which money already had been appropriated to pay for wage increases.

Going forward, he said, it is the council's priority to freeze wages because of the worsening recession and the town's need to increase savings.

The wage freeze "was consistent with what the council was looking for," Daniels said.

Town officials estimated the town would save \$28,626 from the frozen salaries. Increases for the current fiscal year will be paid to employees retroactive to July 1, 2008, according to the contract.

Luci Pantuosco, who works in the Tolland Public Library and is a member of the Connecticut State Employees Association, which represents about 34 employees in Tolland including Town Hall support staff, library employees, and school paraprofessionals, said the new contract is a fair deal that permits employees to retain the same level of service to residents that they expect.

The Connecticut State Employees Association is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union and represents about 22,000 public- and private-sector service workers.

Shortly after the rejected deal in February, Town Manager Steven R. Werbner announced town layoffs and the restructuring of several positions, some of which directly impacted the library, Pantuosco said.

Among the reductions were the elimination of an assistant town clerk and a library circulation assistant. Losing an library assistant, Pantuosco said, has forced remaining staff to fill in on weekends.

"One of the big selling points is our job security," she continued, referring to the no layoff clause in the deal.

The town has been seeking concessions from local bargaining units, and recently negotiated an amended deal with the local chapter of the Teamsters to freeze salaries for 2009-10.

The contract with the International Association of Fire Fighters, which represents six paid firefighters in Tolland, still is pending.

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