

Police a year without contract

Insurance plan sticking point in negotiations

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MIDDLEBURY — Nearly a year after the town's police union contract expired, town officials and police still haven't come to terms on a new agreement.

The two sides have been in negotiations since last June, after the town announced plans to change health insurance plans for town employees and police to health savings accounts. The savings accounts require beneficiaries to spend a certain amount on their deductibles before insurance covers the remaining costs. The switch in health insurance plans has remained the primary point of contention between the town and police. Union officials argue that the plan isn't substantially equivalent to their previous plans, but town officials say the plans are the same and they've saved money by making the change.

The police union's contract expired in July and covers eight officers in the department.

"It's the major sticking block," First Selectman Thomas P. Gormley said. "I'm uncertain of how long this will go."

While health care has been the primary issue for the union, Matt O'Connor, a spokesman for CSEA/SEIU Local 2001, a union that represents police and town employees, said the two sides have been unable to come to an agreement on other items. Police are still in talks over workplace conditions, which O'Connor attributes in part to the lack of a new radio communications system and negotiating new rates for private duty pay.

"The health care issue hanging over everything else has made it difficult for both sides to come to an agreement on any of the other issues," O'Connor said.

The town held arbitration meetings last week in regard to the health care plan, but it is unclear when a decision will be made, O'Connor said.

This year, the town fully funded the health savings accounts for each town employee, which includes \$1,500 for individual enrollment and \$3,000 for two or more people. Other employers require workers to make the contributions themselves.

Town employees and police have expressed concerns that in the future the town will require them to pay for the insurance themselves.

Town officials had hoped to reach a new agreement with police before the start of the 2010-11 fiscal year.

Any increases in costs will force town officials to find a way to finance salary increases while they are still trying to draft a new budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year. However, the town has already reserved \$194,420 in its budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year to be used to offset any increases in salaries or other contract items by any of the town's unions.

The town starts negotiations with the Teamsters, which represents public works employees, in July and police dispatchers in December.

Chief Financial Officer Lawrence S. Hutvagner said the Board of Finance would have to find other accounts to make transfers from if the amount set aside was too small, but he said he believed the amount was more than enough for all of the negotiations.