

## **Firefighters, police see meet and confer as win-win for city, employees**

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Relations between city management and labor are better than ever, thanks to a new communication policy put in place a year ago, say leaders of the organizations that represent Yuma's firefighters and police officers.

Now they would like to take that relationship to the next step with a labor relations process called meet and confer. It's a process that would have to be approved by the Yuma City Council; employee relations currently are the responsibility of the city administrator.

"Our main reason we want to take it to the council level is to codify the improvements that have been made," said Mike Caltabiano, president of Local 1234 United Yuma Fire Fighters Association.

While Yuma's public safety personnel appreciate the steps taken by City Administrator Mark Watson to open communications between management and employees and to address their concerns, they want to make sure those improvements stay in place over the years to come through a meet-and-confer process.

Watson said such a process may require a change in the city charter, which now specifies that the administrator manages employee relations. He also expressed concern that meet and confer would divide the city's work force and could set "disparate treatment of employees." In addition, it likely would take more administrative time to manage, he said.

Instead, he suggested that the less formal communication policy and issue forum he implemented a year ago be given more time. It already has resulted in the discussion of several issues that have since been addressed, he said.

"The bottom line," he told the council last week, "is that I don't believe the proposed resolution (calling for council action on meet and confer) is necessary. We have a process in place to address issues."

Caltabiano acknowledged that the new communication policy has been effective. The concern, he said, is that there are no guarantees it will remain when Watson leaves.

He also stressed that while representative groups for the public safety personnel are in the forefront for the push for meet and confer, it would apply to all city employees.

"This would take it beyond one person," Caltabiano said. "Once meet and confer is in place, it would take a vote of (the majority) of the council to change it."

The essence of meet and confer, explained Eric Egan, representative for Yuma Lodge No. 24 Fraternal Order of Police, is an open dialogue process between recognized employee groups and city council to achieve an understanding specific to the needs of each employee group.

"It's about more than money," Caltabiano said. "We want to be able to have open discussion. We just want fair compensation comparable to other communities of our size, benefits to take care of our families and a better working environment. All these together will make for happier employees and better service to the community."

Caltabiano and Egan stressed that meet and confer is not the same as collective bargaining, and it definitely forbids a work stoppage or work slowdown.

Instead, meet and confer would establish a positive process for city management and employees to work together on issues, "recognizing us as equal partners in serving the community," Egan said.

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