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Mistrust between police union and city leadership festers

BY KELSIE ANDERSON *Feb 2, 2015*

COLUMBIA — A recent accusation from the director of Columbia's police union that the City Council broke a promise to hire more officers highlighted the ongoing mistrust between the union and city leaders.

Dale Roberts, executive director of the Columbia Police Officers' Association, told the council at its Jan. 20 meeting that it had broken a "solemn promise" to use money it saved by transferring 911 operations to the county to hire and pay more police.

City Manager Mike Matthes refuted Roberts' claim at the meeting. "It's a lie," Matthes said. "I wish you would stop that, especially in this venue."

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Matthes told the *Missourian* during a Thursday interview that distrust of the police officers union, along with the drop in public approval of the Police Department, stems from the "constant cadence of negativism" perpetuated by union tactics.

Roberts said at the Jan. 20 meeting that the city saved \$2 million when the 911 and emergency management center were transferred to county authority. (The actual number is \$1.8 million, according to the city budget for fiscal 2014.) Roberts said the council pledged during a Jan. 22, 2013, meeting that it would funnel all that money toward public safety.

In an email to the *Missourian*, Roberts provided minutes and highlighted comments Second Ward Councilman Michael Trapp made at that meeting during a council discussion of whether to accept a grant to pay for firefighters.

Trapp said the council had hoped voters' approval of a new 911 tax would free up general fund money in the city budget and that the council had "pretty well pledged those towards firemen and police," according to an archived video of the meeting.

In the *Missourian* interview, Matthes said the city wound up using \$1.3 million of the 911 savings to balance the budget. The remaining \$500,000 was used to fund three new police officers and two new firefighters.

Roberts believes that's a violation of the council's pledge. He said the council wrongfully took the pledged money out of public safety to spend elsewhere.

Matthes maintains the council's actual commitment was to first address the budget deficit then to put the rest of the money toward public safety.

"You have to stop deficit spending first; that was always established," Matthes said. "You can't spend money you've already spent. The promise was that whatever was left would be dedicated to public safety. And in fact that's what the council did."

Roberts said he was taken aback by Matthes' rebuttal at the Jan. 20 meeting. It came during the "scheduled public comment" portion of the meeting, when council members and staff normally don't engage in discussion with the speaker.

"We were just shocked," Roberts said of his association members. "That portion of the meeting isn't meant as a tool for discussing information. It's for supplying information, so I wasn't really expecting a response.

"I have been in politics for years, and I've never heard anybody just flat out say, on the record, 'You're lying.'"

The city has been struggling to find money to fund more police and firefighters. Voters in November rejected Proposition 1, which would have raised property taxes to pay for 40 new police and 15 new firefighters.

"We are 30 percent understaffed in the Police Department. We're 30 percent understaffed in every single business unit we have," Matthes said.

Mayor Bob McDavid, the leading proponent of Proposition 1, said a big part of the struggle is that sales tax revenue has fallen by 20 percent, largely because of Internet sales. The city's rising population, inflation and a \$4.8 million interest payment on the city's pension plan has left it short of money.

Yet, the public safety budget increased by \$4.7 million from fiscal 2013 to fiscal 2015.

"In spite of this, we've been able to increase public safety spending by 8.8 percent over the past two years," McDavid said. "The key is that funding has increased. I'd like to see it increase more, but general fund revenue isn't keeping up with inflation."

Matthes said he doesn't think Roberts was purposely misleading anyone with his remarks at the Jan. 20 meeting. He has asked Roberts on several occasions, though, to talk with city leaders first if he has questions about spending.

"He may just be representing the water cooler talk," Matthes said. "But we really want to develop that kind of a relationship where if he hears something that seems egregious, he ought to feel comfortable to come talk to us.

"I just really wish he'd come and ask these questions before he makes statements in public that just aren't true."

Matthes recalled that in 2013, when McDavid first broached the idea of a property tax increase to pay for more police, Roberts held a public forum to argue that the city already had plenty of money to fund the positions.

"Rather than asking us, 'What does this number in the budget mean? Couldn't we use that?', he does a press conference to say that we could. And the fact of the matter is we can't," Matthes said.

Matthes said there are two schools of thought among labor groups.

"One is 'Let's try to get along with folks - you'll catch more flies with honey.' The other is 'We need to have our dukes up in front and out. We'll never get anything if we don't force it.'"

Roberts said the union has been forced into aggressive tactics.

"We've brought the matter (of the 911 savings) up several times in the past and never been able to get an answer or any kind of a response," Roberts said. "So if he's saying we're taking an aggressive approach now, that's because the past approach didn't work.

"It sounds like so far, instead of admitting they broke the promise, he's accusing me of things that are unrelated to the issue."

Matthes also cited the Columbia Police Officers' Association's affiliation with the Fraternal Order of Police, a nationwide police union that he believes has lost credibility because of a "let's go to war mentality" that includes running smear campaigns against police chiefs to promote their agenda.

"And that's what they did to our chief," Matthes said, referencing the union's past call that Chief Ken Burton be fired.

Roberts denies any antagonism between the union and the police chief.

"There was indeed some friction with them back then, but it's pretty much gone away, I believe, since I started working with CPOA," said Roberts, who entered his position as executive director of the union in late 2012 and started full time on Jan. 1, 2013.

He said the police chief and the union's board of directors get along well these days and have been meeting regularly for a year.

"We're working together on stuff. I think it's going quite well," Roberts said. "We get along, and we've made a lot of progress."

A 2013 city survey showed the Police Department had a 65 percent approval rating, which is 8 percent below the national average.

"Trust in the Police Department has been dropping for 15 years," Matthes said. He attributed much of that to "the negative news flow," which is as much a product of past "heavy-handed policing" as it is negative "politicking and old school union tactics."

"The Fire Department is a great example of a group that came through that phase and is now extremely positive to work with," Matthes said. "We don't always agree, but they don't do this sort of stuff. They realize that every time they have negative headlines, it's their credibility that goes down in the public's view."

"I know, empirically, from looking and from my own professional experience, that they're doing a fantastic job in the Police Department," Matthes said, citing low crime rates and the full deployment of police body cameras. He said he has high hopes for the department.

"They're my folks, they're my employees and we're generally on the same side," Matthes said. "We both want the same outcomes."

"Usually the community is correct, and they clearly want a more soft-handed Police Department," Matthes said. "I think once the CPOA leadership takes ownership of the fact that they need to worry about the public's level of satisfaction with their services, we'll be golden."

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.

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