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**SECTION:** B; Pg. 1B**LENGTH:** 1690 words**HEADLINE:** CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS: Police longevity pay part of talks**BYLINE:** Frank Geary**BODY:**

At a time when Clark County is eliminating longevity pay for new employees, the issue of what the Metropolitan Police Department should do with its own longevity benefits is playing out in contract talks between the department and the police officers' union.

Entering into the mix is whether the County Commission will raise the sales tax this summer to hire more police officers.

The new four-year contract will be in effect when the new officers are hired.

Steve Frates, senior fellow for the **Rose Institute** of State and Local Government at Claremont-McKenna College in Claremont, Calif., said the time is ripe to eliminate longevity pay for newly hired officers before the contract is finalized with the Las Vegas Police Protective Association in the weeks ahead.

Taking away a lucrative benefit like longevity pay will be much more difficult after hundreds of new officers are hired. They will demand that extra money, he said.

'Obviously, this is the best opportunity before the next major wave (of officers) comes in,' he said.

Longevity pay is a benefit that rewards officers and employees after they've been on the job 10 years. The annual payments range from 5 percent to 15 percent of an employee's annual salary, depending on seniority.

The Police Department in the past five years has spent more than \$35 million on longevity payments to officers and employees, according to police records.

The cost has grown each year, from \$5.7 million in 1999 to \$8.5 million in 2004. The overall budget for the current fiscal year is \$383 million.

'We have more than 2,000 officers on staff right now,' said Karen Keller, budget director for the department. 'Longevity is a large expense for us.'

County voters narrowly approved Question 9 in November, an advisory question that asked voters to raise the countywide sales tax by a quarter-cent this year and by another quarter-cent in 2009.

The Assembly authorized the County Commission to raise the sales tax, but the state Senate and Gov. Kenny Guinn also must authorize the hike before the seven-member commission can consider it.

The ballot measure estimated the new revenue would enable the Metropolitan Police Department to hire 1,278 new officers over the next decade.

If all of those officers stayed with the department 10 years, and were all eligible for longevity pay at the same time, annual payments would cost taxpayers an estimated \$4.8 million the first year and \$5.6 million the second year, based on calculations by the Review-Journal using the officers' current contract and salary estimates from [policepay.net](http://policepay.net).

Keller said the estimates appear appropriate considering the longevity the department pays out presently.

Sheriff Bill Young said Friday he can't discuss the status of the closed-door talks with the union because they are confidential.

But he said he is concerned with the long-range costs of longevity pay and the drain it will pose on the department's future budget, especially if hundreds of new officers are hired in the next decade.

However, the department presently hires only two of every 10 job applicants, and the sheriff said it's critical to maintain the department's high standards by offering good applicants a competitive salary and benefits. That is harder to do as the cost-of-living continues to climb in Southern Nevada, he said.

'It's rather ridiculous to think we can take it (longevity pay) away from any current employees, but it's my responsibility for the future to make sure we don't have unfunded liabilities,' Young said. 'We want to do the best thing for our employees and the taxpayers, and we will meet somewhere in the middle. ... That's what usually happens with these negotiations.'

The department and union, during the last contract talks in 2001, agreed to change the eligibility requirements for employees hired after 2001.

Older employees receive a longevity payment worth 2.5 percent of their annual salary after five years with the department, and another half-percent each year up to a maximum of 15 percent. The newer employees receive 5 percent of their salary after 10 years, and a half percent in every subsequent year up to 15 percent.

Keller said department doesn't yet know specifically how much the revision will save, but the department estimates it will save between \$235,505 and \$799,117 annually over the next three years.

Supporters say longevity pay is necessary to prevent skilled government workers from leaving the job and taking private-sector positions with a higher base salary.

Dave Kallas, executive director of the Police Protective Association, said there is nothing wrong with rewarding police officers for staying with the same agency for 10 years.

Taxpayers and the department invest many resources to train officers, and longevity pay helps protect that investment.

'The taxpayers wouldn't want so much turnover because they want to see a return on their investment,' Kallas said.

April Ryan, senior analyst for a company known as [policepay.net](http://policepay.net), which compiles information on police salaries and benefits for 200 different departments, said about 75 percent of those departments offer longevity pay.

'You have a police officer with 20 years of service. It's hard to replace him, especially with someone from the academy,' Ryan said.

'Who would you prefer protecting your kids? Somebody with 20 years of service or somebody fresh out of the academy? It's better to pay them a little more to keep them around.'

But critics like Frates say longevity pay is outdated and no longer needed since government jobs pay as much or more than private-sector jobs and because they offer good benefits and a pension.

Frates said police officers are more in demand than other public-sector employees in places such as Los Angeles, but he also said it's not prudent to have police officers in their 50s out on the streets fighting crime.

Frates equates longevity pay to a 'transfer of wealth' from local taxpayers to government employees.

'There is no reason whatsoever for it,' he said. 'If there was a problem with people leaving public employment, that might be a factor. That is not the case. These are great jobs with great benefits and a great pension.'

The contract talks, which started earlier this year and are ongoing, unfolded at a time when Clark County Manager Thom Reilly eliminated longevity pay for new employees during talks with small unions that represent the county's park police officers and investigators with the district attorney's office.

Contracts with the county's two large labor unions are scheduled for closed-door negotiations starting next year, Reilly said.

Reilly, after he was hired in 2001, eliminated longevity pay for management personnel, attorneys and physicians at University Medical Center before eliminating it for newly hired union workers, he said.

Reilly said public-sector wages in Southern Nevada are higher than many comparable private-sector positions.

'The wage disparity has disappeared and it begs the question, 'Why do we have programs like longevity in place if they're not meeting the purpose?,' ' Reilly said.

#### LONGEVITY PAYMENTS

Below are the longevity payments the department's top officers received last year. The payments this year will be higher for executives still on the payroll.

Undersheriff Douglas Gillespie	\$17,961
Assistant Sheriff Ray Flynn	\$17,476
Assistant Sheriff Mike Zagorski *	\$19,564
Assistant Sheriff Rod Jett	\$5,646
Deputy Chief Mike Ault	\$20,672
Deputy Chief Cliff Davis	\$20,655
Deputy Chief Bill Conger	\$19,510
Deputy Chief Carl Fruge*	\$17,697
Deputy Chief Dennis Cobb	\$13,958
Deputy Chief Greg McCurdy	\$12,646
Deputy Chief Lou Pascoe*	\$9,190
TOTAL	\$174,975

\*Retired

SOURCE: Metropolitan Police Department

#### CURRENT CONTRACT

The Metropolitan Police Department and the labor union that represents its police officers are negotiating a new four-year contract. The following benefits are included in the current contract that started in July 2001 and expires at the end of next month.

##### VACATION AND HOLIDAY PAY

- Officers receive 14 paid holidays per year, including Nevada Day, the day before Christmas, the Friday after Thanksgiving, a 'floating holiday,' and a 'professional-leave day.'
- An officer who works a holiday receives time-and-a-half pay and a future day off.
- Officers receive 120 hours (three weeks) of paid vacation. After 15 years, they get four weeks. After 20 years, they get five weeks.
- Officers can receive advances of future vacation-leave if they need time off.
- Officers can exchange up to 40 hours of accrued vacation for 40 hours of wages.

##### SICK-LEAVE PAY

- Officers receive 104 hours of paid sick leave per year.
- Sick leave hours can be used for bereavement leave.
- Sick leave hours can be used to care for immediate family or a 'significant other.'
- Officers who use less than four sick-leave days per year receive three shifts of 'bonus time' pay. Officers work shifts that range from eight hours to 12 hours.
- Officers are reimbursed for up to 1,000 hours of sick leave accrued when they leave the department.
- In December each year, department buys back up to 50 percent of all sick-leave hours accrued above the 1,000 hours accrued for future reimbursement.

## OTHER BENEFITS

- Officers and employees are paid regular hourly wage during lunch hours.\*
  - Employees get six months maternity leave following birth or adoption of child.
  - Bilingual employees receive an extra \$750 per year.
  - Canine officers receive 10 hours overtime pay each pay-period for caring for dogs at home.
  - Uniformed officers receive uniforms free-of-charge and a \$1,225 a year clothing allowance, while plainclothes officers receive a \$1,475 a year clothing allowance.
- \* Not mentioned in contract

SOURCE: Collective Bargaining Agreement between Metropolitan Police Department & Las Vegas Police Protective Association

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