

# How localities can avoid police and firefighter layoffs

By CAMERON PRIEBE

There is a perfect storm brewing that may force many Michigan communities to lay off thousands of police officers and firefighters.



Cameron Priebe

In May, Gov. Jennifer Granholm cut \$41 million from state revenue sharing to local governments, funds that are mainly used for police and fire services. Now the Legislature is considering an additional \$162 million in cuts.

This is in addition to the \$3 billion that state lawmakers have already cut over the last eight years.

When you combine these cuts with the unanticipated effects of Public Act 312, communities are left facing some very difficult decisions.

PA312, an act that former Detroit Mayor Coleman Young was instrumental in passing when he was a state senator, prohibits police and firefighters from striking over contract issues. Instead, the act requires binding arbitration when the police and firefighter unions cannot reach

an agreement with a local municipality. Unfortunately, the arbitrator is not required to consider a community's ability to pay. So arbitration awards often result in major layoffs of police and firefighters, or communities being forced to raise taxes on residents to pay for them. For example, the City of Ann Arbor is facing the elimination of 14 positions in the Fire Department in the fiscal year 2010-11 as a result of a PA312 ruling.

As a former police officer, I understand the critical role police officers and firefighters

play in our community. However, with the financial awards PA312 has given to police and fire unions, and the cuts in revenue sharing over the past eight years, communities are facing a tremendous financial burden. That is why many of my fellow mayors, supervisors and prominent leaders from around the state have joined together to form the Coalition for Fair and Efficient Government (CFEG). The purpose of the coalition is to seek fundamental changes to PA312.

One of the several vital changes that CFEG proposes

would prevent arbitrators from granting awards that communities do not have the ability to pay. The recommended changes would require an arbitrator to consider the impact of an award on a community over a minimum of a five-year period. Additionally, the arbitrator would be prohibited from raiding funds dedicated to other local government priorities in order to comply with a PA312 award.

Second, the act should be modified to allow an arbitrator to consider the impact of an unforeseen event or catastrophe — for example, the

closing of a major plant in a municipality — after an award has been issued.

It is no secret that these are tough economic times. Now is the time for our state legislators to make bold decisions. If they do not act now to make changes to PA312, communities will have to lay off police officers and firefighters, raise property taxes, or cut essential services to our residents.

■ TAYLOR MAYOR CAMERON PRIEBE, 58, RETURNED TO TAYLOR GOVERNMENT IN 2005 AFTER WORKING NINE YEARS AS DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SERVICES IN WAYNE COUNTY. PRIEBE CAN BE CONTACTED BY E-MAIL AT TAYLORNEWS@AOL.COM.

Sunday 8/16/09 Detroit Free Press