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Dilatory Tactics in Pittsburgh

In the past couple of weeks we have witnessed foot dragging on the part of Pittsburgh's City Council and the Firefighters' Union in an apparent effort to forestall or derail the expenditure reductions needed to restore Pittsburgh to fiscal soundness and stability.

While the delaying tactics of Council in putting off until this week a preliminary vote on the agreement with the Oversight Board are unlikely to have much real impact, the actions of the Firefighters have the potential of creating serious problems for the restoration of fiscal stability in the City. In the end, Council has little choice but to sign on to the Oversight agreement without its wish list of amendments in the version they sent to the Board.

Without the agreement, the City and its authorities and agencies will be unable to borrow any money. That means as the City nears the depletion of cash in November or December, there would be no choice but to make very sharp spending cuts, an unlikely occurrence, or raise property taxes, and seek to impose a commuter tax which also would mean a significant wage tax increase for residents. Beyond that, with no agreement in place, the Oversight Board will probably be unable to propose a plan to the legislature that would contain a broad array of creative recommendations including the tax reform the City has long claimed it needs. Moreover, the Act 47 plan by itself will not solve Pittsburgh's enormous debt burden and in a short period, the City would face an even greater crisis with less room to maneuver. In sum, for the Council to deny the intended role of the Oversight Board would be foolhardy and self-defeating.

At the same time however, the firefighters union will not put the interests of the City ahead of their private interests and are working on two fronts to derail the needed changes in staffing and spending. They have obtained signatures to have a referendum question placed on the November ballot that would make adherence to certain national standards for public safety part of the City's Code. This is a blatant attempt to stop reform and reorganization of the fire department and thereby prevent Pittsburgh from achieving needed savings in that department. The firefighters' union would have us believe that Act 47 coordinator, the Oversight Board and the City administration would put in place a system that knowingly and deliberately makes Pittsburghers less safe.

If the proposed ordinance passes, it will result in a virtually endless stream of lawsuits, appeals and more suits as to whether Act 47 and the Oversight Board have the authority

to override the Home Rule Charter. Consultants and experts will be arrayed on both sides debating whether this plan or that plan conforms to standards. Indeed, the firefighters have already filed suit to stop the Act 47 recommendations with respect to the fire department from being put into force.

Let's be clear. There is no long-term, sustainable solution to Pittsburgh's excessive spending that does not involve major cuts in the fire department. This has been known for years but Council and successive mayors have been unwilling to deal with the developing problem. The firefighters' union apparently believes the legislature or the courts will permit the levying of new or additional taxes that will provide more revenue for the City. Those revenues presumably would preclude the needed expenditure reductions. Absent a plan that includes downsizing of the department, it is extremely unlikely the General Assembly will provide additional taxes.

If the firefighters' union is successful in forestalling needed spending cuts, they are virtually guaranteeing hefty tax hikes on Pittsburgh property owners, wage earners and possibly commuters. In that event, the City will have taken a giant step backwards in its search for a way out of its financial morass.

The City Council could provide leadership by following up their Act 47 plan approval by signing on to a sensible agreement with the Oversight Board that does not insist on provisions the Board cannot possibly accept. Beyond that, Council must begin to show as much concern for the future of the City and its taxpayers as it has for the people who work for the City. It is not easy, but there is simply no choice. Continuing to complain about the efforts of those who have been duly appointed under state law to find a solution for the City is not helpful and reflects an unwillingness to recognize the awful reality and limited choices the City faces.

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