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NJ city layoff plan cuts police force by half

The elimination of 180 positions from the force means more bad news for Camden, which has already seen 37 homicides this year

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CAMDEN, N.J. — The city will lay off nearly half of its police officers and a third of its firefighters, while eliminating positions in every other city office, according to a layoff plan approved Tuesday by the state.

The 383 layoffs represent about a quarter of the city's workforce and touch all corners of city government — from 15 courtroom positions to 20 police dispatchers to all four animal-control officers.

The elimination of 180 positions from a 373-member force means more bad news for a poor, violent city that has seen 37 homicides this year. A national survey recently named Camden the second-most dangerous in the United States, although police officials have pointed to some recent reductions in crime.

Camden appears to be in a worse predicament than Newark, which laid off 167 of its 1,034 police officers this week after negotiations broke down between their union and the city. Cities and towns around New Jersey are struggling this year following cuts in state aid, with layoffs in public safety increasingly common.

The Camden City Council will vote on its layoff plan on Thursday, and those affected will be notified by Friday. The layoffs would take effect Jan. 18.

The number of layoffs could be reduced in the coming weeks, according to city officials, if there are retirements and if the employee unions make concessions.

But the unions have indicated no plans to deal, and Camden's Fraternal Order of Police printed 3,000 fliers to be distributed reading: "Layoffs = More Crime, More Assaults, More Shooting, More Murders, Can We Afford This?"

"We are open to discussing concessions," said John Williamson, union president. "What we are not open to is unreasonable demands and having things rammed down our throats."

Williamson called the layoff plan "absolutely unbelievable" and said negotiations with the city "have been kind of at a standstill."

Al Ashley, the president of the union representing superior officers in the Fire Department, said the union was not given any guarantee that concessions would reduce the number of layoffs.

But the city attorney, Marc Riondino, said: "That's not correct. They make certain concessions, those concessions will have a dollar amount that will directly reduce the number of layoffs."

Whatever the final number, the layoffs will be felt by the residents of Camden, where "a great relationship with the police" allows the New Visions Homeless Day Shelter to feed, clothe, and care for hundreds each week, said Kevin Moran, the shelter's executive director.

Every afternoon, crowds of homeless people, many of them drug-addicted or suffering from mental illness, congregate outside the shelter, he said. Police officers are there patrolling the block, "ensuring drug dealing is kept to a minimum outside and that nothing escalates into violence."

"They maintain a safe environment and allow us to concentrate on helping those who need it," he said.

Moran said he had also noticed a recent decline in the prostitution and drug traffic on Broadway since Police Chief Scott Thomson stationed more uniformed officers along the busy downtown corridor.

"People know the police are there now," Moran said. "Their presence has been felt."

Thomson urged officers to agree to contractual changes. "We must take our fair share of concessions to save as many brethren officers as possible for the good of each other and most importantly, the residents!" he wrote in an e-mail to The Inquirer.

Even with layoffs, he said, in the last two years Camden police have grown more efficient through new technology and partnerships with other law enforcement agencies.

Likewise, in her layoff plan Camden Mayor Dana L. Redd said the city would be pursuing help from entities like the state police, which already has a presence in the city. The Delaware River Port Authority and 19 Rutgers University officers also patrol the city.

Last week, Gov. Christie provided Camden \$69 million in special aid reserved for struggling municipalities, less than what Redd had requested. Only \$1.5 million of that money was steered toward preventing layoffs, and city officials said Tuesday that they did not know how it might end up being used.

That pot of money, known as "transitional aid," is intended to gradually wean Camden off the state dole. But since Camden does not have the tax base to sustain itself in the future, the financial situation might only worsen.

"Unless they're going to throw up casinos starting tomorrow and they're finished in six months, we're not going to have any more revenue [in fiscal 2012] than we did this year," said Ashley, the fire union official. "Where does it end? It breaks my heart."

Riondino, the city attorney, cautioned calm. "The City of Camden will still be patrolled even with these cuts," he said. "Trash will be still be picked up. No firehouses are going to close."

Still, in the layoff plan approved by the state Civil Service Commission, Redd ominously warned of the consequences awaiting the city.

Community centers would open irregularly, she said, and the city's ability to pursue economic development would be greatly hampered by cuts to the Planning Department.

The Department of Code Enforcement would lose a dozen employees, which "will adversely affect the city's redevelopment" and slow its ability to move more than 3,000 abandoned properties back to the tax rolls.

With all four animal-control workers slated to be laid off, animal control would be privatized, according to the plan.

And the Department of Public Works, which cares for an extraordinarily dirty city with old, broken infrastructure,

will lose 37 people. Due to attrition, it is already down to about 120 workers from more than 180 seven years ago.

Camden's long economic meltdown began with the loss of industry more than a half-century ago. The city is so lacking in taxable property that its revenue covers only about a quarter of the city budget. In other words, it would need to quadruple its tax base in order to avoid needing special state aid.

Traditionally, Camden has been bailed out by the state at the last minute to close budget deficits, and there haven't been major layoffs in years.

From 2002 until January 2010, Camden was under state control and forbidden to raise property taxes. During that time state appointees approved PILOTs, or payments in lieu of taxes, that reduced the amount of money large corporations had to pay in taxes.

During the takeover, the amount of money Camden collected in taxes dropped while the state funds it received ballooned.

Redd's budget for the current fiscal year calls for raising taxes 3 percent, the maximum allowed under the law that brought Camden out of state control. That brings in just \$600,000; unlike other municipalities, Camden is not allowed to go to referendum to increase taxes beyond that number.

Cuts in state aid this year only compounded the problem. The deficit on the \$138.8 million proposed budget stands at \$26.5 million; the 383 layoffs would close that hole.

Public safety takes the brunt of the layoffs, and that's what rattled Camden most on Tuesday.

The layoffs of 15 positions in the Municipal Court "will severely impede the operation of the court," according to the layoff plan, and will reduce the amount of revenue the city collects in fines.

In the Fire Department, 44 at the rank of firefighter would be laid off along with 23 superior officers. The Police Department would lose 32 superior officers and another 148 rank-and-file.

Due to civil service rules, seniority would allow some to take a demotion rather than a layoff. So even though all four police captains will be eliminated, they will not necessarily lose their jobs. Someone at a lower rank would be laid off instead.

The Police Department also faces the elimination of 33 nonuniform positions, including 20 dispatchers. To deal with the cuts to public safety, Redd said in her plan that the specialized units, like investigations, will be scaled back in order to maintain street patrols.

At the intersection of Broadway and Viola, in a South Camden neighborhood devastated by drugs and despair, young men on the corner laughed when they heard the news that 180 uniformed police officers may be laid off.

"I ain't going to lie," one of them shouted. "It's good news for us."

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