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Last Updated: June 24, 2010 1:00AM

Commentary: Lansing

Lansing fails again on public safety reform

Jeff Jenks

While local units of government struggle under revenue sharing cuts and declining property tax revenue, many in Lansing and around the state talk about "cost saving reforms."

Unfortunately, there's little actual reform, despite strong efforts by members of the Michigan Municipal League to encourage the Legislature to help cities hold down costs. One of the best examples: Reform of PA 312 of 1969, a law that requires binding arbitration for labor disputes between communities and public safety officers.

The Michigan Municipal League is strongly supportive of a key reform that would require an arbitrator consider first and foremost whether a community has the ability to pay an award and a clear definition of exactly what ability to pay means.

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Earlier this year state Sen. Randy Richardville, R-Monroe, generated much excitement when he introduced SB 1072, a bill amending PA 312. In the 41 years since PA 312 was passed, there has been no substantive reform despite decades of decisions that have crippled communities and forced layoffs of many police officers and firefighters.

That excitement turned to disappointment as SB 1072 passed the Senate in a watered-down version that not only fails to help local units of government control costs, but actually expands PA 312 to include public safety authorities, dispatch authorities, and the like.

Instead of reforming a law that has been broken for nearly half a century, the Senate decided to just make some tweaks around the edges and expand it.

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Now the House Labor Committee is taking up SB 1072. It appears this non-reform reform is being fast tracked, with an "agreement" among labor to get this thing done. The Municipal League, the organization that represents our communities, has been pushing for PA 312 reform as a critical piece of keeping officers on the streets but it has been left out of the "agreement."

If SB 1072 as currently written passes the House and is sent to the governor, it will be a shame. Again, the Michigan Legislature will have shirked its duty to provide real reform and taken the easy route instead of protecting taxpayers. Make no mistake, passage of this law will mean fewer police and firefighters on the job, as cities will be forced to pay higher wages and benefits to a reduced number of employees in those areas.

The Legislature may claim it passed reforms, but nothing will be further from the truth. This impotent bill does nothing to benefit taxpayers or lower the cost of government. Next year when municipalities are still laying off public safety officers, the League will be back before the legislature imploring them to require an arbitrator to consider first and foremost a defined ability to pay.

Michigan has lost more than 2,400 firefighters and 2,000 police officers since 2001, largely because of revenue sharing cuts, declining property values and PA 312. How unsafe do our streets have to become before we start talking about real reform?

Jeff Jenks is the mayor pro tem for the City of Huntington Woods and the president of the Michigan Municipal League Board of Directors. E-mail comments to letters@detnews.com.

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