

Hollywood employees mad at mayor for writing about city's pension woes



More than 80 Hollywood employees, including these officers lined up along a wall in commission chambers, come to City Hall Wednesday to let Mayor Peter Bober know they didn't like him writing about the city's pension woes. (Susannah Bryan / Sun Sentinel)

By **Susannah Bryan**

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Mayor Peter Bober wants you to know the city's pension plans are in big trouble.

Pension woes can be ticking time bombs that can lead to reduced services and increased taxes unless cities come up with a way to pay for benefits promised long ago, industry experts say. The problem is nationwide, but Bober has put the spotlight on Hollywood.

In a message published in the city's "New Horizons" magazine and posted on its website, Bober dared to address Hollywood's F-rated pension plans, saying the "sad, cold facts" must be faced to avoid exacerbating the city's pension woes.

And this week, city workers made it clear they don't appreciate his wake-up call.

Dozens of officers, firefighters and other City Hall employees crowded into a commission meeting Wednesday night to let the mayor know what they thought of his message. More than 45 cops, off duty and out of uniform,

lined the back wall. A dozen firefighters and more than 25 employees from other departments showed, too.

Bober's letter promised to give residents "the straight dope...even if the news is not so hot."

Pensions funded under 60 percent are considered weak, Bober wrote. All three of the city's pension plans rate an "F" for being underfunded at less than 60 percent, based on a grading system by the Leroy Collins Institute, a public policy think tank based at Florida State University.

In 2013, the city's fire pension was underfunded by 41 percent (\$129 million), police underfunded by 55 percent (\$138 million), and general employees underfunded by 56 percent (\$170 million).

City Hall employee Barbara Armand told commissioners she didn't like the tone or timing of the mayor's letter, saying it reminded her of 2011. That was the year Hollywood declared financial urgency in the face of a \$38 million budget hole, slashing salaries and resorting to drastic pension reform — with the blessing of voters.

City workers are still feeling the pain of those cutbacks, said Chris Cassidy, president of the general employees union.

"None of the employees have caused this unfunded liability," Cassidy told commissioners. "Hollywood used to be the place to be. We were a family. In 2011, the residents were pitted against the employees for mismanagement. And here we are again."

On Thursday, police union leader Jeff Marano said many employees assumed Bober's letter would lead up to more "gutting" of pay and benefits.

Bober said he did not anticipate his letter would cause so much angst. He said he had no regrets about writing the letter, but agreed the timing could have been better, considering the police and fire unions are in the midst of negotiating new contracts. The union for the general employees plans to begin negotiations in January.

Union leaders argue they have already made concessions and don't take kindly to talk of unfunded pensions.

"I think he's trying to stir up the pot," Cassidy said. "It's a scare tactic."

With many workers still healing from cuts made in the past, Commissioner Peter Hernandez said the mayor's letter only added salt to the wound.

"They are taking it as a warning shot of things to come," Hernandez said. "I'm not saying this is not something that has to be dealt with. Just like every city in the country, we are going through pension woes. It's an ongoing issue nationwide."

If the mayor intended for his letter to be a wake-up call, it worked, Hernandez said.

"A lot of people don't want to hear the bad news," Bober told the Sun Sentinel. "We need to be careful about the financial decisions we make going forward. That was the only point I was making. Although the economy is improving, we are still not out of the woods."

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