Atlantic County freezes police salary guides but hefty raises included in contracts

By MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, January 13, 2015 5:35 pm

Atlantic County government heads into budget season with three newly settled law-enforcement contracts that have largely frozen the salary guides of each bargaining unit until Dec. 31, 2017.

But that doesn’t mean rank-and-file law-enforcement personnel in the county Prosecutor’s Office, jail and Sheriff’s Office won’t get raises.

Salary guides already give average increases of more than 4 percent a year through a step system as employees pass anniversary dates.

Some annual steps give increases above 10 percent, and officers double their starting salaries in eight to 14 years, depending on their hiring date.

“Those steps are typically much more in a percentage increase than what non-law-enforcement people receive,” county Counsel James Ferguson said.

He said law-enforcement wages are among the county’s biggest costs, and public safety spending accounts for about half of the county’s annual $196 million budget.

Still, the county considers it a big win for taxpayers that more money will not be added to the salary guides, said Assistant County Counsel Richard C. Andrien.

The contracts also create alternative salary guides for new hires and add steps to the guides that require people to work longer to hit the top of the pay scale. The only increase to a step is a 2 percent raise a year to the top salary in each of the guides.

Andrien successfully negotiated a contract last year with PBA 243, covering 88 sheriff’s officers and investigators below the rank of sergeant, which runs from Jan. 21, 2013, through Dec. 31, 2017.

Interest arbitrator James W. Mastriani decided contracts with PBA 77 for 45 detectives below the sergeant’s rank in the Atlantic County Prosecutor’s Office and with FOP 34 for 171 corrections officers at the jail in Mays Landing. Those contracts go back to Jan. 1, 2011, and run through Dec. 31, 2017.
Ferguson said Mastriani took into consideration the economic challenges facing the county as casinos close in Atlantic City, leaving many unemployed, and as the remaining casinos’ share of the city and county tax burden is in flux.

Under the sheriff’s officers’ contract, someone hired at $33,101 in 2013 gets regular step raises and will make $72,978 in his/her ninth year.

But for those hired on or after Jan. 1, 2014, the guide starts at $25,500 for six months of training, then goes up to $33,101 for another six months. It isn’t until the 13th year that the salary increases to $74,437.

In the Prosecutor’s Office contract, a detective hired at $49,677 in 2011 got a 5.5 percent raise in the second year to $52,535 and successive raises each year, and will make $95,900 in his/her ninth year.

Those hired after Nov. 10, 2014 will also start at $49,677 under the new contract, but will be making $81,733 in the ninth year and won’t hit the top of the scale at $101,770 until the 14th year.

In the county jail officers’ contract, starting salary remains $36,152 and after 13 years on the job increases to $73,379 for those hired after Sept. 29, 2014, compared to increasing to the same amount after 10 years for those hired on or before Sept. 29, 2014.

Longevity bonuses, which generally start in the sixth year of employment and range from $800 to $2,500 per year for older hires, have also been lowered by 20 percent for new hires in all three contracts.

“All of this benefits the county moving forward,” said Ferguson. “That’s not to say we are still not spending a lot of money.”

The county had wanted to eliminate the longevity pay, Andrien said. He said the county’s goal is to get the increase in labor contract costs for all bargaining units down to under 2 percent a year.

Andrien said the county’s analysis of the new salary guide for the Prosecutor’s Office predicts the costs of the contract will increase by close to 2 percent in 2017.

Andrien and Ferguson are now negotiating with six other unions representing the sergeants and superior officers (lieutenants and captains) at the Sheriff’s Office, the Prosecutor’s Office and the jail. Those groups do not use salary guides with automatic steps, but the starting salary for all officers is above the top salary for the rank-and-file officers, Ferguson said.

Sergeants, lieutenants and captains receive contractually negotiated annual salary increases, and they get additional percentage increases as they move up in rank to reflect their greater experience and responsibility, Ferguson said. Lieutenants and captains do not get overtime.
In June, Gov. Chris Christie signed into law an extension until Dec. 31, 2017, of the state arbitration cap on police and firefighter contracts, which limits awards to 2 percent when unions and municipalities are deadlocked in negotiations and turn to a state arbitrator.

The law has been credited with helping stem the growth of property-tax bills in the state.

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