

RIVERSIDE COUNTY: Union members challenge supervisors at meeting

BY DUANE W. GANG

STAFF WRITER

dgang@pe.com

Published: 09 November 2011

05:26 PM

Members of one of Riverside County's largest employee unions had a message to send this week to supervisors: The workers are hurting financially and do not want additional pay cuts.

To get the message heard, members of Service Employees International Union Local 721 submitted forms asking to speak on 25 of 28 items on the Board of Supervisors policy agenda.

"We have a rare, perhaps unprecedented, morning policy agenda where we have one speaker on almost every policy calendar item," Board of Supervisors Chairman Buster said. "It is going to be an exciting moment."

Indeed. The move led to heated exchanges between union members and supervisors, particularly Buster, and an admonishment from the county's lawyer to stay on topic.

At typical board meetings, a few residents attend and put in speaker slips to discuss agenda items.

When they do, they are asked to keep their comments to three minutes and on the specific topic. If they want to discuss non-agenda issues, they are asked to do so during the board's public comment period.

From the start, SEIU members made brief comments in support of the specific agenda item and then proceeded to urge the county to negotiate in good faith with the union.

SEIU is in contract talks with the county. One of the key issues is a push by management to require employees to pay their own retirement contributions.

The county is facing an \$80 million budget shortfall for next year, and supervisors want labor concessions to help bridge the gap. County officials have warned of possibly hundreds of layoffs.

SEIU members and other general employees pay 8 percent of their salary toward their retirement for the first five years of work. After that, the county pays the cost.

Ending that benefit would be a de facto cut in take-home pay, and employees said it may be too much to bear.

County employee and SEIU member Lori Williams told supervisors she has taken on her daughter's student loan payments because her daughter cannot find work.

"Our rainy day fund is on life support," Williams said. "It is pouring out here."

Eventually, Supervisor John Tavaglione said the union members should speak during regular public comment and "not on individual agenda items that are completely unrelated to their concerns."

At that point, Buster went directly to the public comment period to allow employees to finish speaking.

When asked what prompted Tuesday's action, SEIU spokeswoman Tracy Silveria said members are "angry

and frustrated with how the board has been handling things from the dais.”

“You lead by example,” she said.

Supervisors last week voted to move forward with paying their own pension contributions, but a formal resolution to put it into effect has not yet come back before the board.