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UPDATED: Long Beach police union votes for pension reform

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LONG BEACH — The city and its police union have reached a tentative budget-saving pension reform agreement.

Officials of both groups announced the deal late Wednesday.

With Long Beach facing a projected \$20.3 million budget deficit in fiscal year 2012, city officials are proposing to cut \$9.4 million from the Police Department, including 32 sworn police officer positions, with 14 coming from patrol divisions.

The agreement, which still must be approved by the City Council, would avoid some of the planned reductions.

"It's guaranteeing we won't have any layoffs, but won't eliminate all the cuts," said Long Beach Police Officers Association President Steve James.

The almost 900-member POA gave its

assent to the plan over two days of voting, Monday and Wednesday, with 73 percent voting in favor, James said.

Police officers currently pay 2 percent of their salaries toward pensions but would pay

9 percent under the new pact. The city has been picking up most of the employee contribution under past police contracts.

Future police hires will also have new, less-generous pension benefits, according to James.

"This thing will probably save in the neighborhood of \$100 million over 10 years," James said.

City officials declined to speak on the record about the effects of the pending agreement.

However, projections from earlier this month - without the deal - show that the police department has a \$6.9 million

budget reduction target in fiscal year 2013 and a \$4 million goal for 2014.

Additionally, up to 44 officer and support staff positions could be eliminated in 2013 and 26 jobs in 2014.

City Manager Pat West has said that if employees pick up more of their pension

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costs before current contracts expire, there would be fewer service and workforce reductions in 2013 and 2014.

In a statement, Mayor Bob Foster said the POA vote is an affirmation the need for sustainable pensions.

"I applaud the members of the Long Beach POA for taking this important step and recognizing that the fiscal health of our city and high-quality level of public safety service that this community deserves go hand in hand," Foster said.

James added, "This vote demonstrates yet again that our officers are more concerned about the public's safety than they are about their own personal financial gain. It is an honor to represent such selfless people."

Wednesday's accord marks the second time in the past two years that Long Beach's police union has altered its current contract to help the city address fiscal problems.

Council members will vote on the agreement in closed session on Sept. 6, city officials said. If approved, the council would vote on the legislation approving the deal in an open meeting.

Fire Department union representatives are still negotiating with the city in the hopes of softening \$5 million in proposed cuts that include shrinking crews on some city fire engines from four to three.

Long Beach Firefighters Local 372 President Rich Brandt said he is willing to offer pension pickups and second-tier benefits for new hires, as the police department has done.

"We're trying to come to a reasonable deal with the city," Brandt said.

"One thing I'm adamant about is safe staffing for the citizens of Long Beach and the firefighters."

The council has until Sept. 15 to pass a budget for the next fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1.

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