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Metro, Union Negotiators Optimistic About Bargaining Talks

- 'Candid discussions' with 'mutual respect' mark the talks
- Goal is to make June 30 contract agreement deadline

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(May 5, 2006) Metro and the agency's three major labor unions are optimistic about the progress of bargaining talks, thus far, as they work toward meeting a June 30 contract agreement deadline.

"We're communicating and there are tough issues," says Deputy CEO John Catoe, who heads negotiations with the UTU and ATU. "There are things the unions want for their members and things we in management want changed. We get into very candid discussions...at times they are very warm."

But, Catoe says the ground rules for bargaining talks call for mutual respect among the parties. The goal is to negotiate agreements union leaders and their members will regard as fair, that address their interests and will gain their support.

"We want an agreement that will allow us to recruit and retain professional employees and that will ensure the economic sustainability of the organization," says Catoe. "It should be an agreement that will be the starting point for improving the relationship between management and union leaders."

Neil Silver, president of ATU Local 1277, agrees that negotiators are dealing with some knotty problems during their talks.

'Finding common ground'

But, "we can sit down and discuss our positions," he says. "We're finding common ground and, that said, I respect the people across the table and the process."

In a recent letter to UTU members, General Chairman James A. Williams and the union negotiating team wrote, "We already have had several across-the-table negotiating sessions and the atmosphere has been very favorable."

The letter noted that the union had not yet received specific proposals from Metro and, therefore, could not provide a side-by-side comparison with union bargaining goals. "(B)ut be assured this committee will do everything in our power to assure that when we do bring you a proposed settlement, it will protect you and your family for the duration of the contract."

Brenda Diederichs, Metro's Labor Relations chief, is leading the agency's negotiations with the TCU. Although neither side has offered contract proposals, the parties have identified 10 common interests

and already have tackled two of the “meatier” issues.

“Everybody’s there with the notion of solving problems and doing what’s best for Metro and the employees,” says Diederichs. “It’s very much a joint effort by the TCU and Metro.”

Olivia Nelson, division chair of TCU Local 1315, is pleased with progress made so far in negotiations. She notes that common interests have been grouped together for discussion at the bargaining table.

“Unless we run into a roadblock – and I don’t think we will – we should be able to make the (June 30) deadline,” she says.

Joint training sessions

Once contract agreements have been reached, Catoe says management and union negotiators will conduct joint training sessions.

The purpose is to ensure that both sides have the same understanding of contract provisions and how they apply to management and labor.

“Both parties will be in the room so that everyone gets the same interpretation,” says Catoe. “There will be no misunderstandings because members of both negotiating teams will be there.”

After the contracts are in place, Catoe says service sector general managers will meet regularly with local UTU and ATU officials to resolve issues that may crop up. A major goal: reduce the number of union grievances and arbitrations.

“We communicated to them that we’re interested in the welfare of our employees,” Catoe says. “The unions are interested in the welfare of their members, so we started off with a common interest. That’s how the process has been moving.”