

County and City Employee

WASHINGTON STATE COUNCIL OF COUNTY AND CITY EMPLOYEES — AFSCME AFL-CIO



Kimberly Frost

When disaster comes calling, the cry goes out...

'Call Frosty'

It's just after 8 o'clock on a cold January morning. The telephone on Kimberly Frost's desk rings.

"There's been a water break in downtown Vancouver," the caller says. "It's the main line. Water is gushing out and the road is flooded." After gathering more details and thanking the caller,

This is another in a series of articles highlighting Council 2 members and the services they perform.

Frosty (that's Kimberly Frost's nickname), a dispatcher at the City of Vancouver, swings into action.

The first priority is to call the water department; they will need

to turn off the water and repair the pipes.

Next, it's the Signs Department that will need to erect notices to close the road to traffic and set up a detour.

The 911 dispatchers will need to be made aware of what is happening.

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Pension plans face threats

Council 2 saw several improvements passed into law when Christine Gregoire was governor. A major gain was the lowering of the retirement age for Plan 2 from 65 to 62 for 30-year employees.

Now that change and other aspects of our pension plans are under threat as the Washington State Legislature starts its 2013 session.

A major obstacle on the path ahead is the defection of two Democrats to the Republican Party. Their move changes the control of the state senate.

After the election, the line-up was 26 Democrats and 23 Republicans. But two Democrats, Rodney Tom and Tim Sheldon, switched parties and decided to caucus with the Republicans, changing the line-up to 25-24 in favor of the Republicans.

"We strive to be non-partisan, but the truth is that when the majority goes to the Republicans the threats to our pensions are much higher," explains Council 2 Deputy Director

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Wages up, layoffs down as economy improves

City and county employees are starting to climb out of the deep hole into which the Great Recession plunged them.

Wages are increasing, layoffs have decreased significantly, and some jurisdictions are even hiring new workers.

"Some employers have settled multiple-year agreements, with increases averaging around 2 percent," says Council 2 Director of Organizing Bill Keenan. "Although we are a long way from a full recovery, the situation is in strong contrast to that three years ago when we were looking at wage givebacks, wage freezes, furloughs and significant layoffs."

Medical insurance payments have been stable on average, but the settlements have been "all over the map," Keenan adds.

"Employers seem to be continuing their quest to pass on cost increases by boosting the portion of the premiums that are paid by employees.

"We have been able to resist some of that, but the results have varied from zero in some cases to increases as high as a 15 percent rise in monthly premiums in other cases."

Where there are premium increases, they tend to chew up some of the wage increases, Keenan says.

The public sector recovery tends to lag behind the general economy, he adds. Just as it took a while before the full force of the recession hit the public sector, so the public sector is now following the

uptick in the general economy that began a couple of years ago.

As the pickup continues, public sector employees can expect the upward trend to continue, Keenan says.

But, he adds, many of the smaller cities and counties that do not have the financial resources are still having a real struggle to balance their budgets.



Contribute to the scholarship fund!

CHRIS DUGOVICH

This year Council 2 will go over the half-million mark in dollars awarded to our deserving kids who are seeking a college education.

In 2013 alone your union through its Scholarship Committee will award over \$60,000 in scholarships to members and their dependents.

It is a great program that does at least a small part in helping with the escalating cost of higher education. The good ol' days are gone when a decent summer job might earn you enough to pay for the oncoming academic year. With tuition alone escalating to over \$12,000 a year at our state schools, even the best paying summer work isn't going to cut it!

On July 12th at Chambers Bay Golf Course your local union can send a four-some for some fun and a great cause. Even if you can't make it or you are not a golfer you can participate and contribute.

Sponsor a hole and all your proceeds will go to a scholarship. Last year alone we raised more than \$21,000 that will be used to provide an additional 10 scholarships of \$2,150 a piece.

We are out to better that number this year but we need every local union's help!

Sign up at the Council 2 website, www.council2.com.



Letter from the President

Scholarship application forms are now available

Application forms for the 26 scholarships available from Council 2 are now available online. To download a form, go to: www.council2.com and click on scholarships. Please note that the forms must be returned no later than March 18, 2013.

The Washington State Council of County & City Employees offers the following scholarships, which are awarded yearly:

- One \$5,000 yearly four-year award (\$20,000 total) to a child who is a dependent or under legal guardianship of a local union member in good standing of the WSCCCE;

- Six \$5,000 scholarship awards to children who are a dependent or under legal guardianship of a local union member in good standing of the WSCCCE;

- Six \$2,000 scholarship awards to children who are a dependent or under legal guardianship of a local union member in good standing of the WSCCCE;

- Ten \$2,150 awards to children who are a dependent or under legal guardianship of a local union member in good standing of the WSCCCE. These represent the funds raised at the 2012 golf tournament.

- Three \$1,000 continuing education awards, to members in good standing of a local affiliated with the WSCCCE.

Union organizing should be a civil right, economist says

It's a good time to rebuild the middle class, says John Burbank executive director of the Seattle-based Economic Opportunity Institute.

One way to achieve that, he says, is to strengthen unions.

Burbank, who spoke at Council 2's Legislative Weekend, said that since 1980 workers' productivity has risen, but wages and salaries have remained stagnant.

"What happened after 1980? Ronald Reagan became president and he busted PATCO, the air traffic controllers' union, which was the signal that it was acceptable to bust unions," Burbank told Council 2 members.

"Many workers lost their bargaining power, they lost the ability to grow their wages. Health care costs shifted to the employee."

As corporate profits rose from \$253 billion in 1981 to



John Burbank speaks at a workshop at Council 2's Legislative Weekend

\$1.8 trillion in 2010, average workers' incomes rose from \$39,000 to \$41,000.

"There's no excuse that wages need to be held down like this, but because workers have less bargaining power, we have this situation," Burbank said.

Among the ways we can restore middle class prosperity, Burbank added, is to make union organizing a

civil right.

"Discrimination on the basis of union activities should be illegal. Doing so would bring in the powers of the human rights commission and give workers a lot more protection. We want to be building an offense, not a defense."

Public service and public servants need to be respected, Burbank said.

College tuition needs to be affordable again, he added, outlining a plan whereby students at colleges would "pay forward" their tuition.

Rather than being burdened with high debt on graduation (the average is \$18,000), they would be given free education, but would pay the fees over the next 25 years into a trust fund at a rate of 1.5 percent for community colleges and 4 percent for universities such as the University of Washington.

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Pat Thompson.

Another obstacle is a decision by the Washington State Supreme Court last year that the state is not fully funding education. Education funding, which could run to \$1.4 billion, is part of the overall budget package, which will face a \$1 billion deficit.

"In the past, bills dealing with our pensions become tougher when they had to rely on a package deal," Thompson explains. "The result is that these bills are held hostage until they reach a deal with both parties."

The hopeful side is in the House where the Democrats have a much stronger working majority. "Our main hope is the new governor, Jay Inslee," Thompson adds.

The constant drumbeat of employee

bashing adds an additional threat for the union, Thompson adds.

"There is a growing movement to blame public sector workers no matter what sacrifices we make.

"The ultimate goal of these attacks isn't just to weaken our union, it's to eliminate us.

"But if you eliminate collective bargaining and union security, unions can't survive."

A key is to develop relationships with legislators even before measures are considered, Thompson says.

"When you do call on them when these measures are debated, they will know who you are."

He urges members to get to know their representatives and to put their issues before them now.

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New PERC director aims at more efficiency and more transparency

Mike Sellars is on a mission. As the new executive director of the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC), he wants to make the organization more efficient and more transparent.

In that way, he says, PERC will more effectively fulfill its role of minimizing disruption in the public service through providing an efficient dispute resolution service.

He also wants the world to know about success stories that show that collective bargaining works and that it helps to improve, not hinder, relationships between employers and employees.

“Collective bargaining is not a roadblock to progress, history will show it has been a path to progress,” Sellars said.

Speaking at a workshop held at the Legislative Weekend in Olympia in late January, Sellars said when people have a negative view of collective bargaining and its effectiveness it is often because they are quick to recall times when it has been an adversarial relationship and certain groups pillory one another.

“When you lambast an employer it might or

‘Collective bargaining is not a roadblock to progress, history will show it has been a path to progress.’

— *Mike Sellars, Executive Director of PERC*

might not be called for, but that is what people remember. They recall those quotes when someone is calling someone the worst person in the world.

“You might have to have a dispute, but you still have to have a relationship.

“A good relationship does not mean that one side always rolls over. Council 2 does a good job of remembering that there has to be a relationship because you have to continue working together and that is what produces success.”

Sellars set out several objectives that he would like to achieve at PERC to make it more efficient and thereby reinforce the effectiveness of collective bargaining.

They are:

- To make PERC more transparent and its rules clear.

“We have to be clear to help you and employers understand the right way to do things,” he said.

“Are we really saying what we mean? If people don’t understand the decision, the decision is not clear. If we are regulating yet no one understands what we are saying and the same disputes keep coming up, we are not doing a very good job.

“If we are more transparent, disputes will be resolved more efficiently, more effectively and more clearly. I looked at our forms, for example, and I didn’t know what they mean. We need to make them clear.”

- To make the case process more user-friendly, which might entail doing things differently.

“Sometimes doing things the same way you have always done them provides comfort and a degree of stability,” Sellars said. “But for us it is probably time to look at where we should be doing things differently.

“Our case process is inefficient; it is a lot of extra work for the parties involved.”

- To make the website a more effective tool.

“Some websites are really effective, while with



PERC Executive Director Mike Sellars speaks at a workshop at Council 2’s Legislative Weekend.

others you feel you have to change everything because it is all outdated. We are somewhere in between.”

- To encourage more feedback.
- To be more timely.

“When you come to us and you have a case that needs to be heard and it takes a year longer than it should to reach a decision, we are not serving you as we should.”

- To reduce the case backlog.

“The backlog is better than it has been, but it is still not good,” Sellars said. For example a year ago, the commission had a backlog of more than 30 appeals pending before it. Now, that backlog is down to 21 appeals.

FROSTY, from Page 1

Emergency vehicles will not be able to get through, so they will need to know how best to avoid the scene as they speed on their way to a call.

The police will need to know, too.

Because the flooded street is on a bus route, C-Tran, the local transport department, will have to be informed so they can divert the buses that will be affected.

The school district will need to know, too, as buses likely are on their way to pick up students and might regularly use the flooded road.

It doesn’t stop there.

Calls start to come in from the public. “Why is the main road closed?” “Why can’t I get to work on my usual route?” “When is the road going to be opened?”

Although such major emergencies are fortunately not a regular event at the dispatch office, all kinds of situations that require attention arise almost every day.

Some are routine, such as a street

light that is out, whereas others require more organization, such as a power outage that shuts down traffic lights and creates the potential for accidents.

In all cases Frosty and her co-worker Sue Lazzarini (whose nickname is Momma Sue) are at the center of the whirlwind of demands that the incidents create.

“This is the type of job that calls on us to be immediately responsive,” Frost says. “We never know what is waiting for us on the other end of the line.

“It is important to remain calm.

“We deal with a lot of upset customers, which is the downside of the job. It is our fault if the street light is out. You try to explain the situation, but it requires a lot of patience and tolerance.”

There can be no doubt, however, that Frosty — warm-hearted, upbeat and outgoing in spite of her nickname — is up to the task, as is

Momma Sue, who has been a dispatcher for about 20 years.

The most memorable event came in 2008 when temperatures plunged, forcing Frost and Lazzarini to work around the clock.

“She worked the days and I worked the nights,” Frost says. “Water lines were freezing to private properties and we were seeing lines breaking at the roadside. We had crews going everywhere all the time.”

Frost, who has been a dispatcher since 2007, says she and Lazzarini form one of the best working teams that exist. “We back each other up. We are able to vent to each other. We work together so well that people think our job is easy because we make it look as though it is.”

Frost became involved in Council 2’s Local 307-VC about four years ago and was elected secretary-treasurer three years ago.

Now she is anxious not only to serve the union but also to learn

more about it. She recently attended the Legislative Weekend in Olympia as part of that process.

As the workforce becomes older, she believes that young people must step up and become involved in the union. “Our foundation will crumble if my generation does not become involved,” she says. “Either we stand for something or we will fall for anything. We cannot quit.”

Frost is doing a “fantastic job” in the workplace and in the union, says Ron Fredin, Vice President of Council 2 and Local 307-VC president. “She is very trustworthy and is a great union officer. She realizes that the baton needs to be passed to the next generation. We need these young people in the union.

“She and Sue balance one another,” adds Fredin, who is the Street Department Supervisor and relies on Frost and Lazzarini for efficient service. “If we didn’t have them, I don’t know what we would do.”

Sign up now for golf tourney

The 12th annual Council 2 golf tournament will be held at Chambers Bay Golf Course at 1 p.m. on July 12.

All proceeds will go to support the Council 2 scholarships program.

Details and a sign-up form are on our website, www.council2.com.

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CAPITOL TOUR



These photographs were taken when Council 2 members, attending the Legislative Weekend in January, toured the State Capitol.

Top: Members gather for a group photograph.

Above: Members outside the Legislative Building.

Right, top: Tour guide Chuck Waiste describes the architecture, proceedings and procedure in the State Senate.

Right, bottom: Tour guide Chuck Waiste tells the history of the Washington state seal in the foreground.