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Cities and Towns Oppose Guaranteed Lifetime Contracts

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Legislation would eliminate the need for negotiations, allowing contracts to go on indefinitely, costing taxpayers millions

PROVIDENCE -Mayors, Town Managers and municipal leaders from across the state joined together today at the State House to strongly oppose legislation that would allow the automatic continuation of employment contracts for municipal employees and teachers, negating the need for negotiations. The bill (H5437) passed out of the House Labor Committee, will drive rising personnel, healthcare and retirement costs increasing the burden on local taxpayers. Rhode Island, the smallest state, has the 6th highest property tax burden in country.

“Automatic contract extensions will financially burden municipalities and taxpayers for years to come. We urge our Representatives at the State House to oppose this bill when it comes to the floor,” said **Brian Daniels, Executive Director of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns**. “Neither the General Assembly or the State would agree to a contract that would go on indefinitely. The State shouldn’t mandate that for cities and towns either.”

The following municipal officials attended the press conference: Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza; Cranston Mayor Allan Fung; Johnston Mayor Joseph Polisena; North Providence Mayor Charles Lombardi; Barrington Town Manager James Cunha; Lincoln Town Administrator T. Joseph Almond; Jamestown Town Administrator Andrew Nota; Charlestown Town Administrator Mark Stankiewicz; North Smithfield Town Administrator Gary Ezovski; Burrillville Town Manager Michael Wood; and South Kingstown Town Manager Robert Zarnetske

“Today, we stand together, with taxpayers, frustrated. Legislators are not listening to what cities and towns need to govern our budgets, control our costs, and look out for taxpayers in our communities,” said **Cranston Mayor Allan Fung**. “Contract continuation is not a democrat or republican issue. This bill will affect every single city and town across the state.”

“The contract continuation bill will guarantee lifetime contracts, and without a doubt, raise local property taxes,” said **Johnston Mayor Joseph Polisena**. “Johnston, recently settled a contract negotiation in forty-five minutes being fair to all parties. We do not need to be handcuffed by the General Assembly.”

“It is difficult to bring change, however, we have the obligation to protect taxpayers, and be fair,” said **North Providence Mayor Charles Lombardi**. “In the end its municipal leaders who have to balance our budgets and send out tax bills. We do not need the General Assembly deciding how we treat our taxpayers.”

“Municipal leaders have one goal - keep our citizens safe, provide quality services that are affordable for the taxpayer,” **said Barrington Town Manager James Cunha** . “This bill supports special interests plain and simple. Our contracts are negotiated fairly and equitably, with few exceptions. In our town, we already have two contracts signed before their expiration and two tentative agreements signed.”

In a letter to House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello and Representatives, the League expressed their concerns with H5437 SUB A: “The League has supported legislation allowing temporary contract extensions if both parties agree. Unfortunately, H5437 SUB A far exceeds that reasonable approach and would tie the hands of local officials when trying to negotiate contracts in the best interests of both employees and taxpayers.”

The League’s advisory counsel Vincent Ragosta, Jr., Esq. noted “The amended contract-continuation bill ill-advisedly alters the existing collective-bargaining process. Like the original bill, it automatically extends an otherwise-expired contract until the parties have agreed to a successor contract, which is bad enough in its own right. But under the amended bill it could take months, if not years, to resolve a contract dispute, during all of which time municipal management would be impotent to impose necessary and appropriate modifications in furtherance of the citizenry’s rights to rational and fiscally sound public employment.”

Ragosta is one of the most-experienced, highly regarded municipal labor attorneys in Rhode Island.

“We continue to support legislation to allow temporary contract continuation if both parties agree in good faith. In past years, the League supported legislation allowing voluntary contract extensions for firefighters, which was signed into law,” **said Daniels** . “We prefer that approach and strongly oppose evergreen contracts bills like H5437.”

H5437 would extend municipal collective bargaining agreements indefinitely. The League testified in opposition to the initial contract extension proposals earlier this year, as well as in 2018 and 2017, when the Governor vetoed similar legislation. League members continue to oppose proposals for “evergreen” **contract extension**.

Founded in 1968, the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns is a municipal membership organization that serves as the unified voice of local government in Rhode Island.

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