

N.J. police, firefighter union leaders plead for federal funding to prevent layoffs

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Leaders of New Jersey police and firefighter unions pleaded Thursday with a majority of the House delegation for federal aid to help prevent looming layoffs.

State cuts to municipal aid and a proposed tightening of the cap on how much municipalities can raise their budgets have combined to produce layoff notices in large cities and small boroughs, said Anthony Wieners, president of the state Policemen's Benevolent Association.

"Are we overstaffed? Absolutely not," Wieners said before the closed-door meeting in Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr.'s office. "My concern is the health and safety of the residents. We've been accused, the PBA and the unions, we're a special interest group. Our special interest group is the state of New Jersey and the residents."

He said that while a municipality can make reasonable decisions to cut some services, such as cleaning streets or picking up garbage less often, there's no way to plan for crime or emergencies.

Republicans leaving the meeting offered no promises of help, however, and some Democrats also hedged, even though all were sympathetic.

The federal stimulus law enacted in February 2009 included hundreds of billions of dollars in aid to states and cities to prevent a wave of public sector layoffs that would compound the rising unemployment.

But that money is running out, and support in Congress for an extension is slamming up against possibly stronger concerns about the budget deficit and the November election when every seat in the House and more than one-third of the Senate is on the ballot.

"It's very difficult for us to have another stimulus given the fact that our deficit this year is \$1.5 trillion," said freshman Rep. Leonard Lance, R-Clinton Township. "The Republican perspective is that we have got to get our fiscal house in order."

Fellow freshman Rep. John Adler, D-Haddon Heights, had a similar take.

"I'm very concerned that we may spend so much we will not be able to get the budget under control," said Adler, who won a seat in a Republican-leaning district two years ago and has occasionally broken ranks with the Democratic majority. "So we have to balance those legitimate concerns of the public safety officials with private-sector job creation."

Pascrell, D-Paterson, said he has supports a bill to extend support for teachers and public safety workers, and it could be included in a pending bill providing supplemental funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He conceded the meeting in his office did not immediately produce any converts.

“None of the 13 delegates there want to bail out anybody, want to bail out the governor, but I think all of them believe, they understand the responsibility we each have that we can’t just turn out backs,” Pascrell said.

The political implications of putting the funding in a war bill is that opponents could be accused of not supporting the troops, a prospect that Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen, R-Harding, criticized as he left the meeting.

“Supplemental bills should be about supporting our troops,” he said. “If the Democratic leadership puts in a lot of things that are not germane, then that represents a problem. Understandably, there are a lot of issues the states have. But that’s not the proper bill.”