

NY/NJ Port Authority Police Dept.

Port Authority union officials claim security is at risk on bridges and tunnels

By Steve Strunsky — Friday, April 30th, 2010 'The Newark Star-Ledger' / Newark, NJ

Police union officials stepped up to the podium at today's meeting of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to publicly accuse the agency of jeopardizing security at its Hudson River crossings and spending unnecessarily on overtime by understaffing the department.

Agency officials denied the accusations, pointing to billions of dollars spent on security in recent years and staffing levels at the Port Authority Police Department that are about 40 percent higher than pre-9/11 levels. Officials also noted that the agency and the police union were in the midst of contract negotiations, after the old agreement expired in January.

Michael DeFilippis, second vice president of the Port Authority Police Benevolent Association, told Chairman Anthony Coscia and fellow commissioners during the public portion of today's meeting that patrol staffing levels were "dangerously" low. For instance, DeFilippis said that at some hours, if just one patrol car took the time to make a traffic stop on the George Washington Bridge, the span would go virtually unguarded.

PBA President Paul Nunziato later added that inadequate staffing had led to exorbitant overtime costs, including highly publicized examples of senior officers' more than doubling their base salaries to over \$200,000. The high overtime, which the Port Authority has insisted it is trying to reign in, then factors into costly pension benefits.

"If we had enough cops," Nunziato said, "we wouldn't have the overtime, we wouldn't be in the paper, we wouldn't be having the crazy pensions."

The number of Port Authority police officers has fluctuated over the past decade, with a spike immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, followed by a decline, then another increase, and finally a modest drop-off over the past two years.

According to staffing figures provided by the Port Authority, as of March 31 there were 1,718 officers on the force, including 1,404 PBA members. That's down from 1,760 total officers and 1,459 PBA members in 2008, but still well above pre-9/11 levels of 1,330 total officers and 1,001 PBA members.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Port Authority Executive Director Christopher Ward rejected the officers' assertions.

"Let me be clear," Ward said, "we have spent, in the past seven years, almost four billion dollars, three billion dollars, to bring enhanced security to all our facilities. We have the largest number of police officers at any time, historically, in terms of our operations. We are reviewing all of our police and operational security efforts continuously."

Ward then added: "We are in, obviously, contract negotiations with the police union, and we will bring a contract forward."

Asked if he thought the officers were grandstanding on the security issue as a bargaining ploy, Ward said he "would never want to characterize why they've obviously exercised their expression here and raised their concerns."

Nunziato had been listening from a few feet away, and objected to the contract issue being raised.

"If I wanted a contract I wouldn't be opening my mouth. It's not about the contract — it's about the public's safety and the officers," he said. "This should be a 2,000-man department."
