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Police probe allegations that officers are retaliating over pension cuts

By [William Kelly](#)

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Some police officers are responding to a Town Council decision to slash town employee retirement benefits by "harassing and intimidating" residents, two council members said Thursday.

Councilman Robert Wildrick and Council President David Rosow sought assurances from Public Safety Director Kirk Blouin that he would end the alleged retaliation.

Wildrick raised the subject at a council meeting after Blouin requested council permission to fill two vacant police officer posts. Wildrick said he's been hearing complaints from residents about the attitude of officers since the council approved deep cuts to police pensions on Jan. 18.

"Lately, due to some budget decisions, there's been an attitudinal change by a few whose attitude is harassing and intimidating," Wildrick said. "This is unacceptable. To add more personnel when there is an attitude that exists due to this difficult decision, gives me pause."

"I share some of your concerns," Blouin replied. "We have a small percentage that we consider bad apples."

Blouin said after the meeting that the department has launched an internal investigation into the matter.

Records obtained from the department Thursday show that 606 traffic citations were issued from Jan. 19 through Feb. 15. That is more than double the 299 citations handed out during the month prior to the pension vote. The records show 47 citations were issued the day after the pension vote, compared to eight citations on that day.

Police have a degree of discretion when deciding whether to issue a warning or cite a driver for a traffic violation. Blouin said department morale has suffered over the pension cuts, and some officers may be taking a harder line when pulling people over.

Rosow said that, apart from the proposed zoning overlay for Royal Poinciana Way, he's received more calls from residents complaining "about the police officers and the tickets they've been issuing" than about any other issue facing the town.

Detective Bryan Wilkins, the local union representative, said later Thursday that the allegations are without merit, and that the union does not condone retaliation.

"It sounds like Mr. Wildrick is looking for preferential treatment for himself and other residents," Wilkins said.

"The director [Blouin] can make those comments but I think those are without merit, also. There's no retaliation here. I think I would hear about it."

Asked about the sharp increase in citations since the pension vote, Wilkins said, "It just shows that you have a lot more infractions. There's nothing else."

Wilkins described the officers' morale as "very bad. The guys out on the street who pound the pavement every day are very upset and, I think, rightfully so. For Mr. Wildrick to say that retaliation is going on, lacks a sensitivity on his part. The men and women of the department I represent are professional."

The union's officers and sergeants voted unanimously Wednesday night to reject ratification of the pension changes and other provisions imposed by the council following an impasse in labor negotiations between the town and the union, Wilkins said. But the council's decision on the pensions and other matters is legally binding. The council granted Blouin permission to fill the two officers' posts after he said the department is stepping up efforts to make sure it hires only the best applicants available.

The town will enact the pension cuts for all police officers, firefighters and general employees around May 1, Town Manager Peter Elwell has said. The officers and other employees will not lose any benefits they have accrued. The existing plan will be divided and paid out separately from the new one, Elwell said.

Some benefits, such as cost-of-living increases for pension payments and survivor benefits for employees' spouses, are being eliminated. A multiplier that helps determine the payments employees receive upon retirement is being sharply reduced. Individual employee investment accounts, with matching contributions from the town, are being set up to supplement the lower pensions.

Police officers and firefighters will be required to wait until 65 to draw pensions accrued after May 1. Currently, they can begin drawing them upon retirement, after as few as 20 years of employment.

Elwell has said the level of existing pension benefits is "generous" but not financially sustainable. The police union countered that the cuts would hamper the town's ability to recruit and retain the best personnel.

Historically, Wildrick said, the demeanor of the town's police officers has been courteous and professional. By far, most of the officers remain that way, he said. The others have to understand that the council's decision to cut their benefits was difficult but necessary, he said.

"We must begin to get the attitude back to what it was," he said. "The union has to self-police. It can't all happen from the top down."

Asked what could be done to improve morale, Wilkins said that the council could reverse its decision.

"Realistically, the ball's in the town's court," he said.