

Judge halts changes to Spa City union members' health insurance

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — City employees who are CSEA members will not see a change in their health insurance July 1 as city officials initially planned. A Saratoga County Court judge issued a temporary restraining order Friday barring the planned changes. The judge also ordered union representatives to meet city officials at the negotiating table before the order goes into effect.

CSEA, the union that represents about 95 city Department of Public Works employees and about 100 other City Hall employees, will be back in court July 23 for a hearing to fight the health insurance changes proposed by the city.

Mayor Scott Johnson said as of Friday afternoon no date had been set for contract negotiators to meet. Johnson said he was happy the judge ordered the meeting because CSEA has not been willing to negotiate. "I've been waiting to have this meeting since April 1," he said.

On April 1, the city notified employees of its plan to stop offering coverage from four insurance providers and instead offer two products from just one provider, MVP. On April 2, retirees were notified that the change would also affect them.

Johnson said the change is a necessary financial step for the city to take. "Each year the city spends over \$6.2 million in health care costs to which the city employees contribute \$171,000," he said, citing 2010 figures. "That disparity is too great for the city to absorb."

He estimates the proposed change would save \$60,000 each month.

Union spokesperson Therese Assalian called the proposed change "a diminishment of the current benefits."

She said employees with chronic conditions could be especially impacted by the change if their existing doctors are no longer covered or they experience gaps in coverage.

"There was a lot of anxiety out there," she said. "Some people would possibly lose health insurance coverage; some people would have seen a reduction in benefits."

Johnson says no one would lose coverage or experience lapses under the plan and asserts that MVP is "a first-class company" that would provide "substantively similar" coverage.

Assalian said CSEA requested help from the city to analyze data and provide options for cost savings "only to be rebuffed." Friday's order was a victory for union members, she said.

"We will not apologize for standing up for the rights of our members when it comes to a contractual obligation that the city has," she said.

Johnson said the CSEA waited until the "11th hour" to bring the matter into court, rather than coming to the table to

negotiate with city officials.

Negotiations for CSEA's DPW contract began in 2008, while negotiations for the City Hall employees' contract began in 2009.