

OPP scores an 8.5% pay hike on Jan. 1

BY CHRISTINA BLIZZARD - QMI AGENCY FIRST POSTED: TUESDAY, JUNE 04, 2013 06:53 PM EDT | UPDATED: TUESDAY, JUNE 04, 2013 08:13 PM EDT

You gotta love Kathleen Wynne's zero and zero pay freeze. And where can I get one?

Take the pay freeze that was cleverly negotiated for OPP. Except it's not really zero and zero. It's 8.5% over two years. Here's what was REALLY negotiated.

The Ontario Provincial Police Association (OPPA) agreed to no pay increase over two years — but after that, they get a pay hike to bring them up to the rate of the highest paid force in the province.

According to a letter from OPP Supt. Rick Philbin to reeves and mayors, as of Jan. 1, 2014, OPP constables will get a pay hike — from \$87,240 to \$94,702. A sergeant goes from \$98,093 to \$106,483. Heck, the detachment clerk goes from \$55,439 to a cool \$60,181.

Not bad for a “freeze,” huh?

The problem is how to pay for it? Small towns who use OPP for policing are struggling to pay. And they're laying off officers to balance the books. It's all very well for the OPP to compare themselves to places like Toronto or Ottawa, but small communities don't have the tax base to afford these staggering salaries.

Peter Hellyer, the chair of the Norfolk County Police Services Board, has ripped off a letter to Wynne, not only questioning the skyrocketing pay increases, but pointing out that three people who signed the deal on the part of the government are senior police officers. “It's a big chunk of change,” says Peter Hellyer.

His force has laid off three officers already — and there are more cutbacks to come. What's more, he fears for the ripple effect, as arbitrators now see this deal as the gold standard and start handing out similar pay hikes to nurses and others on the public payroll.

“Any arbitrator is going to use that as a reference point. It's not just the hit from the police, it's the hit we take from everything else,” he said in a phone interview.

“With the raise pending on Jan. 1, we are struggling to find more cost effective ways of doing things,” he said. They’ve already pulled two officers out of high schools and reassigned a domestic violence co-ordinator from a force of 75 officers.

Meanwhile, he wonders why Commissioner Chris Lewis, Provincial Commander Noreen Alleyne, and OPP HR Bureau Commander Glenn Trivett were signatories to the deal — for the government. He believes as senior police officers, their own conditions of employment were affected by the deal. OPPA President Jim Christie says Lewis and Alleyne, as senior officers, don’t benefit from the agreement. He had some sympathy with Hellyer’s point about Trivett. Although he’s no longer on the force, he was part of a group that could benefit.

“They’re making a good point in that the Commissioned Officers’ Association have a historic agreement with the government in that although I don’t bargain for them, they generally will get the same benefits, improvements and changes in circumstances that I would bargain for our 9,000 members,” Christie said.

He defends the pay hike. “The contract I structured with the government does not put us ahead of anyone. It puts us equal with whoever is number one in the province,” Christie told me. The highest paid force right now is Orangeville.

He pointed out when Tori Stafford was murdered in Woodstock, OPP officers were sent in to help find her killers. “When something bad happens in Ontario, we’re the ones who go in and clean up, so I am not going to settle for my members being paid significantly less than everyone else who calls our service for help,” he said.

Fair enough — what this will likely mean is we’ll have fewer cops on the street. Look, we all support police. I’m just not sure we can afford them.