

DiCiccio: Police unions sought chief's firing for their support

by **Scott Wong** - Sept. 15, 2009 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio said a coalition of Arizona police unions tried to cut a deal with him over the weekend: withdraw his support for Police Chief Jack Harris in exchange for an endorsement from the Arizona Police Association.

When the District 6 councilman rejected the offer, he said, the association on Monday instead endorsed his challenger in the Nov. 3 run-off election, Dana Marie Kennedy.

Brian Livingston, who was appointed executive director of the police association last week, said his group had offered no such deal and called DiCiccio's comments "categorically untrue."

But DiCiccio said a third party, whom he declined to identify, had reached out to him on behalf of the association, asking him to either oppose or take a neutral position on the police chief. If he did that, DiCiccio was told, he would win the backing of the association, which represents more than 9,000 law-enforcement officials in the state.

The association's 18 member organizations include police unions from Phoenix, Mesa, Glendale, Chandler and Tempe, as well as the Arizona Highway Patrol Association and the National Border Patrol Council, Local 2544.

Livingston said the Phoenix Law Enforcement Association, better known as PLEA, is a member but by city charter was not allowed to participate in the candidate-interview or endorsement process.

DiCiccio characterized the proposed deal as yet another effort by PLEA to erode council support for Harris and try to control who sits atop the 3,800-person department.

Technically, only City Manager Frank Fairbanks has the authority to hire or fire the police chief.

"You cannot allow employees groups to determine who their boss is going to be," said DiCiccio, who owns a small commercial real-estate company. "That is just bad government."

PLEA President Mark Spencer said he was taken aback by DiCiccio's talk of a deal.

"We have engaged in no quid pro quo discussions with Mr. DiCiccio and have no third parties speaking on our behalf," Spencer said. "In the end, the real boss is not the City Council, not police management. The real boss are the taxpayers who cast the vote, and that's who we have to pay attention to."

This is not the first time DiCiccio has clashed with PLEA.

Shortly after he was appointed in February to fill a vacancy on the council, DiCiccio said the union's attacks on Harris were no more than "back-East, strong-arm union politics." And he accused Councilman Michael Nowakowski of trying to pressure a top administrator to fire Harris, a violation of the city charter that requires removal from office.

After an internal inquiry, the city manager and city attorney concluded that Nowakowski did not violate the charter due to insufficient evidence.

Both Nowakowski and council ally Michael Johnson are endorsing fellow Democrat Kennedy in the non-partisan election. Mayor Phil Gordon and the other council members have expressed support for DiCiccio, a Republican.