

Let province handle police salaries: former budget chief Soknacki

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By Alex Wright, National Post

The only way to halt the continuing rise of Toronto police salaries is to ask the Ontario government to set pay standards province-wide, says Toronto's former city budget chief.

"The pay for officers has been a problem for the city of Toronto now for a number of years," said David Soknacki, a former city councillor for Scarborough East. "It becomes good for the officers and tough for the taxpayer."

On March 8 the Toronto Police Service released its annual list of employees who made more than \$100,000 a year. In 2009 the list included 1,329 police and civilians at the police service, up from 1,006 in 2008. Constable Michael Thompson was the highest-paid officer on the list other than the chief and deputy chiefs. He earned \$168,928 in 2009.

Mr. Soknacki said that the rising wages are the result of competing salary bargaining units who seek wages that are equal to or higher than other municipalities.

"The bargaining units are very adept at leapfrogging one another ... in their quest to be the highest paid bargaining unit in the country," he said. "They do an excellent job of playing off the municipalities against one another."

Mr. Soknacki said that during his time as budget chief, it was often suggested by both the city and the police that Toronto raise its wages to match those of other police forces.

Another problem is that Toronto officers who live in surrounding municipalities are likely to move to their home jurisdictions if the pay is the same or higher. Police forces do not want to lose their experienced officers, according to Mr. Soknacki, so this drives wage competition.

"They will move closer to home, keep approximately the same income level and usually have a lower cost of living," he said. "Toronto then raises their pay, and then all the surrounding units feel that they must raise their pay, and it goes through another cycle."

The situation has prompted some to suggest that the government of Ontario should step in to do the bargaining. Mr. Soknacki said such a move could cause conflict, but that it is the only alternative to wage competition.

"They would set pay standards province-wide across various skill levels," he said. "So then it would be less likely ... that they would jump to take advantage of pay, and it would be less likely that municipalities would continue to leapfrog one another."