

Mark Klipstein: Soaring public employee retirements damage state talent pool

MARK KLIPSTEIN | president, State Engineering Association | Posted: Friday, April 8, 2011 6:15 am

When [The Capital Times reported recently](#) that Wisconsin public employee retirements jumped 31 percent through Feb. 25 compared to the same period last year, the data did not begin to hint at the breakneck pace of a new phenomenon in the state's public workplace.

Many of us in public employee unions expected that Gov. Scott Walker's measure to all but kill collective bargaining and cut deeply into state employee compensation would create a mass exodus of talent from state and local governments. I predicted this trend would build over months or years. Try just five weeks, as evidenced by new state data that should be very worrisome to anyone who cares about good government.

Buried in the March 31 employee bulletin of the state Department of Transportation is a list of 74 staffers who in the month since the previous bulletin had announced their retirements. These now-departed employees, including senior-level engineers in our association's bargaining unit, represented a collective total of 2,116 years of professional experience – all walking out the door together, from just one state agency, in just one month.

We know the sudden rush of WisDOT retirements is replicated elsewhere in state and local government. It is apparent that Walker's measure — currently tied up in the courts — has already created what will be long-term damage to quality government in Wisconsin. Public employees are retiring quickly, and in droves.

You don't need to be an engineer to figure out that the Walker measure's wage cuts — totaling thousands of dollars a year for middle-class state and local government workers — are driving this escape from Wisconsin government. Public employees in their 50s now see the loss of more benefits as their reward for working to normal retirement age. Hence a greatly increased incentive to retire early.

That burgeoning trend will create all sorts of unexpected consequences for everyone in our state. The biggest is that state and local governments and public schools are suddenly faced with the loss of considerable expertise, institutional knowledge and experience, at a challenging time that requires many practiced hands as the economy recovers. What we'll get instead is critical loss of momentum.

Even if Walker's contested measure is rejected by the courts, or fails enactment in another attempt by the Legislature, serious damage already has been done to good government in Wisconsin. The next wave of retirements will show up in late June, and some of those prospective retirees have already made firm decisions to depart, regardless of how the political battle turns out.

But it gets worse. Gov. Walker's two-year budget proposal all but eliminates a law that requires state government to evaluate whether shifting public work to private consultants is cost-effective. That law, 2005 Wisconsin Act 89, was passed in light of numerous studies showing that such private consulting often is unnecessary and costs more than if state employees continued to do the work.

In the wake of mass retirements, the state will have a ready-made excuse to ditch the law. So many vacancies are popping up in key state employee positions that there will be insufficient dollars to attract equally talented replacements. Managers will go right on hiring pricey consultants, many of whom have been quite willing to contribute to the campaign funds of state officeholders. Less work will get done at greater cost, and the public eventually will notice. Who will get blamed for this likely decline in state efficiency?

Conservative activist Grover Norquist once said the goal of his movement was to make government small enough to drown in a bathtub. The Walker administration's attempt to gut collective bargaining and balance its budget on the backs of beleaguered public workers is threatening to make Wisconsin government small enough to drown in a teacup.

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