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Date: Tuesday, September 18, 2018

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LONG ISLAND



Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone



PBA president Noel DiGerolamo

Widening rift between PBA chief and Bellone



POLITICS & POWER

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The longtime alliance between Suffolk Police Benevolent Association president Noel DiGerolamo and Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, fraying for months, appears near a breaking point.

And for the first time since Bellone's combative predecessor, Steve Levy, the powerful police union leader said he is getting ready to launch an ad blitz in coming weeks aimed at the county executive.

"I'm disappointed to say the least that the county executive who I have called a friend and embraced for many years could cross the line against law enforcement," said DiGerolamo. The union leader would not disclose campaign details, but added, "I have already retained services, I imagine it will be on multiple fronts and last as long as it needs to."

What makes the rift so unusual is that Bellone won election with the strong support of the police union and the PBA not only got a beneficial new eight-year contract but county police were returned to patrolling the Long Island Expressway and Sunrise Highway, which Levy had given to deputy sheriffs to save money.

In disclosing plans to launch the salvos, DiGerolamo cited issues such as Bellone's support of Democratic congressional candidate Liuba Grechen Shirley, who in 2016 tweeted that police officers should be tested for "racism & God complexes" and face deportation.

DiGerolamo went back further to a 2014 Facebook posting of Bellone's top legislative aide Amy Keyes, stating "I am NOT OK living in a world where police can do whatever they want." When the posting became public in early 2016, Keyes apologized to DiGerolamo, who accepted, but now questions Bellone's decision to keep her in her job.

But by far, the biggest chasm between the two men is the looming \$30 million budget hole facing the county because Bellone budgeted \$30 million in health concessions from all 10 county unions that have yet to materialize. Despite

sounding the alarm in his state of the county message in May, Bellone has made little effort and no headway to come to a negotiated solution to the thorny problem, DiGerolamo said, noting that only three meetings were held all year so far.

"I don't appreciate being thrust into his budget issues and having my time wasted to give the appearance he is participating in a process which he isn't," he said. While the PBA contract expires at year's end, DiGerolamo said the agreement and health benefits would remain in place until settlement or arbitration.

In response, Bellone said, "We have been and continue to be at the negotiating table and remain hopeful that we can reach an agreement that is fair to both taxpayers and to the union. Intimidation efforts are neither an appropriate nor effective negotiating tactic."

In his state of the county speech, Bellone called rising employee health costs "unsustainable" and the "biggest financial issue" facing Suffolk. He called for hiring a consultant to evaluate the county's current self-insurance model and why costs have skyrocketed.

But with Bellone's proposed 2019 operating budget three weeks away, his aides on Friday could not say if a consultant has been selected, a contract signed or work begun, even though the deadline to respond to the request for proposals was July 3.

Until now, DiGerolamo has delivered Bellone more subtle messages. In June, the PBA balked at attending Bellone's golf fundraiser to which the union had donated \$10,000 a year earlier. The PBA also backed GOP Comptroller John M. Kennedy for re-election even though Bellone is strongly backing Southampton Supervisor Jay Schneiderman, whose victory could eliminate a potential county executive rival next year.

DiGerolamo would not say if he might withhold backing Bellone for re-election next year. "I think its premature to make an endorsement for 2019 when we haven't done screening for 2018," he said. However, he added, "I don't want to make a direct attack on Steve, but improper decisions have been made and need to be addressed."



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