

It just doesn't add up

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S.O.B.'S STORY (spouse of boss) DAN HAMMES

In the end, it was simple math.

The police chief calculated the benefits of staying on the job, then subtracted the disadvantages of doing so, and made her decision.

She opted to retire.

Her announcement garnered considerable news coverage given recent events. Although Chief Kirkpatrick inherited many problems when she took over the Spokane Police Department, there was considerable controversy during her tenure. There has been litigation, questions about off-duty antics of officers in her department, including one shooting. Add to that, two previous efforts on her part to find work elsewhere and its understandable that her announcement was newsworthy.

There is considerable speculation that she opted to retire because voters had elected a new mayor. Some folks question whether the police chief decided to go willingly before being fired. That speculation led to denials from both the chief of police and staff with the new mayor. Chief Kirkpatrick simply said she wanted to spend more time with her family etc. etc. etc.

Voters can draw their own conclusion.

But while the newspaper coverage of the police chief's resignation was thorough, there was one item that did not receive the attention it merits.

Her age.

The lady is 52.

She decided it was time to retire at the ripe old age of 52.

There was another telling report in the same newspaper a couple of weeks earlier that is also worth a mention.

In this case it was a sports report about a very successful high school volleyball coach. The woman, whose team had lost only one match to date (and eventually won the state championship), has coached for many years. Given that, the reporter asked how much longer she planned to coach. While she deflected the question, she did mention that she is eligible to retire anytime she chose.

She is all of 53 years old.

So the question begs. How many folks working outside of the government could even consider retirement at that age?

Those two stories especially hit home at a time when financial planners caution people against retiring too early for fear they will outlive their money. In fact, most financial advisors recommend people delay retirement n or at the very least defer collecting Social Security n for as long as possible to ensure their money will last as long as they do.

The difference is most government jobs come with a guaranteed pension while most private sector jobs do not. Private industry learned long ago that guaranteed pensions were not sustainable.

In addition, the formulas used by government to calculate when a person qualifies for retirement are quite generous. That is why it is common to see government workers retiring by age 58 n or, as cited above n much younger while folks in private industry are advised to continue working past age 65.

But it cannot continue.

Many states are facing economic catastrophe because of pensions they promised but cannot deliver. New York, Illinois and California face pension liabilities they cannot meet. A full 25 percent of the city of Detroit's \$1.2 billion general fund is used to pay retirees. Other cities face similar lopsided equations that, without change, will produce bankruptcies.

The challenge is few politicians have the mettle to tackle the problem.

Government unions - and the overwhelming majority of union members today are government workers - can marshal millions of dollars and thousands of energized volunteers to campaign against any politician who attempts to address the issue.

Last week, Ohio voters overturned legislation that required government workers to pay a greater share of their retirement n but still much less than their counterparts in private industry. Union officials there claimed the vote portends what will happen next November. They promise to spend millions to elect politicians n largely Democrats n who will continue to use tax dollars to fund generous retirement plans for government workers.

And they may succeed.

Next November.

But eventually the day when 52-year-old policemen and 53-year-old teachers can retire

with comfortable pensions will come to an end. Eventually we run out of money.

It is simple math. DAN HAMMES is publisher of this newspaper.