
CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

Sgt. Mike O'Neil



As the prior issue of the Vermont Trooper magazine was being sent to the membership, we were in the midst of a leadership transition in the Vermont Troopers Founda-

tion and the Vermont State Police Union. Bill Harkness, who had served as our President for over ten years, was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. He is now Station Commander of the Royalton barracks. As a result of this promotion, Bill had to step down as President of VTF and the VSPU. I consider Bill one of my best friends, and it has been my good fortune to work with and learn from him over the many years that I served as Vice-President.

I know that I speak for the entire membership in thanking Bill Harkness for his years of dedicated service to the State Police as President of VSPU and VTF. I saw first-hand how dedicated he was to his position and the members. Bill made many sacrifices in his personal and professional life, often with little thanks or recognition. He put in many long days and nights to undertake whatever was needed to help the members, negotiate a contract, or lobby on behalf of the VSPU or the larger law enforcement community.

Over the years, there were many accomplishments that were achieved as the result Bill Harkness' hard work. The creation and incorporation of the Vermont Troopers Foundation was one of the first actions that he took on as the President of the Vermont State Police Union. The VTF was created to separate the financial, business and political activities in which we were involved, from the Labor issues of the Vermont State

Police Unit of the VSEA. We now are split into the VTF and the VSPU.

The Bargaining teams have successfully negotiated many contracts under Bill Harkness' leadership. The State Police pay plan that we now have is one of the most successful provisions ever bargained for State Police. This pay plan reduced the time required to reach the top of the grade, and insured that all members would be at the highest step prior to retirement, which was not possible under the old plan. There is also the compensation that we receive for off-duty responsibilities, and so many other improvements in our contracts that it would be difficult to list them all.

The VTF became actively involved in politics under Bill Harkness' leadership. Several years ago the VTF made the decision to endorse political candidates in statewide elections. Since that time the VTF has made endorsements at many levels including the recent congressional race. This involvement has been instrumental in many of the accomplishments of the VTF over the years.

The issue that Bill Harkness made his biggest priority was the enhancement of our retirement benefits, most recently with the success in 'recapturing' health insurance. Our retirement system requires the completion of twenty years of service and attaining age 50 to receive maximum retirement benefit. There is an allowance for an employee who has completed twenty years of service to retire at any age and collect retirement benefits when attaining age fifty. The problem with this was the permanent loss of medical insurance benefits if you terminated prior to age fifty. We had seen employees leave the Vermont State Police with over 20 years of service prior to age fifty, unable to 'recapture' health insurance when they began to draw retirement, which we believed was fundamentally unfair. The years of service given by these employees to the State of Vermont should be recognized and reward-

ed with a benefit that is greatly deserved.

Bill Harkness was instrumental in the introduction of legislation to address this problem, allowing for the recapture of medical benefits. There was enormous amount of time and effort put into lobbying on behalf of this legislation by Bill and VSEA Director Anne Noonan. This legislation had become controversial in the last three years and was not passed, but still, Harkness and Noonan continued the fight.

Upon taking over as the President of the VSPU and VTF, I made the recapture of health care my biggest priority. I had spent time at the state house with Bill Harkness in past years and was already familiar with the issue and key legislators. I quickly realized how much respect Bill Harkness had earned with the members of the House and Senate. Each time I testified in a committee or spoke to anyone in the halls, I was told how well the VTF and VSPU had been represented by Bill Harkness. This legislation was introduced again this year as H400.

I am happy to announce that H400 has successfully passed the House and Senate and is awaiting the signature of Governor Douglas. I would like to thank Bill Harkness and VSEA Director Anne Noonan for the hard work that led to the passage of this legislation.

I would also like to thank the members of the House and Senate Government Operations Committees for their hard work and persistence in the passage of H400. A special thanks is owed to Representative Donna Sweaney, Chair of House Government Operations, Representatives Ken Atkins and Patty O'Donnell, and to Senators Jeanette White and Jim Condos who supported us in past years as well as this year.

The VSPU Unit has just ratified a contract that will result in a one year contract with a cost of living increase in July of 2.25%, plus the increase in Steps. While this is not as large an increase as the members were hoping for, I ➤

believe it was the best we could do under difficult financial circumstances and other deficits experienced by the State.

During these negotiations the VSPU bargaining team attempted to address two important issues of concern to the membership. The first was the issue of residency, as required for members hired after January 1, 2001. The second was the changing of work schedules to accommodate special teams training. Colonel Baker was willing enter into serious dis-

cussions in regards to these two issues. We hoped a resolution would be reached that would be acceptable to both sides. During the bargaining process negotiations broke down at the Master Bargaining level. Although an agreement was reached on a cost of living increase we were not able to return to negotiations at the State Police Unit level. These two important issues were not resolved as a result. This was beyond the control of the VSPU bargaining team or Colonel Baker.

The contract agreement that was reached requires that the VSPU Bargaining team again enter negotiations with the State in the fall of 2007. The two issues identified will again be a priority in these upcoming negotiations. I am confident that we will be able to work with Colonel Baker to reach a mutually agreeable resolution to these issues.

Thanks for your continued support of the goals and work of your VSPU and VTF. □