Long Beach Council delays furlough vote again

By Paul Eakins, Staff Writer

LONG BEACH - After an unusual move to closed session in the middle of Tuesday's meeting, the City Council delayed for a second time a vote on furloughing city workers.

The council voted 8-1 to postpone until its next meeting, Nov. 3, a vote that would give City Manager Pat West the power to furlough the 3,800 members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, which is Long Beach's largest city employee union.

West says the furloughs will be necessary to balance the city budget if the union doesn't agree to delay its contractual pay raises for a year.

"I do believe that this council is serious about getting a handle on our budget and that if this is carried over till Nov. 3, that, that would be probably the absolute last time that it is carried over because we have a budget problem that we have to deal with," said Councilwoman Tonia Reyes Uranga, who led the charge to delay the furlough vote.

The council began the meeting at City Hall split over whether to approve the furloughs, then began a heated discussion about the ongoing contract talks with the IAM that City Attorney Bob Shannon said made him "uncomfortable" to hear in open session. So in a rare event, the council went into closed session mid-meeting for about 15 minutes.

When the council members returned to their seats at the dais, they still seemed slightly divided but ultimately voted with near unanimity. Only Councilman Gary DeLong voted against delaying the furlough vote after the failure of his substitute motion (supported by council members Val Lerch and Suja Lowenthal) to approve the furloughs but stipulate that West couldn't implement them until Nov. 3.

West has said that the longer the city waits to implement furloughs, the more it will hurt workers because there will be less time in which to spread out the unpaid days.

"The longer we delay, the more painful it's going to be," DeLong said. "This problem is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger."
Last week the council voted to delay the furlough vote until this Tuesday, at the time seeming to indicate that they would vote for the furloughs this week if no contract deal had been reached.

But several council members said Tuesday that the contracts talks should be allowed to continue without a council vote complicating things.

IAM spokeswoman Christa Indriolo shared council members' concerns.

"This is going to send the wrong message out to city employees," Indriolo said. "It's going to say the writing's on the wall and this is a done deal."

The IAM has a contractually promised raise of up to 4 percent over the next year, though it has temporarily delayed the pay raises this month to allow talks to continue. The union represents non-public safety employees such as librarians, clerks, parks and recreation workers, those who repair streets and many others.

While the IAM has agreed to postpone its pay raise for a year, it wants a guarantee of no furloughs over that year. Most of the city's other eight employee associations have agreed to some form of pay freeze or delay, and their contracts include a promise of no furloughs unless the city is facing a $10 million budget deficit.

Indriolo told the Press-Telegram Tuesday that city negotiators have offered the IAM a no-furlough agreement with a $15 million budget deficit threshold, but that the IAM wants a total furlough blackout.

West has said that he needs to have the option to implement furloughs if the economy takes a turn for the worse and Long Beach's revenues plummet.

paul.eakins@presstelegram.com, 562-499-1278