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Pension plans: Accounting for annuity costs based on past services; Accounting Research Bulletin, no. 36

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Pension Plans

Accounting for Annuity Costs Based on Past Services

1. When costs incurred under pension plans are based in part on services performed prior to the adoption of the plan, the problem arises whether that portion of the costs which are attributable to such services are applicable to the past or to the present and future periods and, accordingly, whether they should be charged to income. This bulletin deals with the accounting treatment of such costs arising out of past services when incurred under pension plans involving payments to outside agencies such as insurance companies and trustees.

2. The committee has undertaken a statement on this subject at this time because of the trend toward expansion of pension plans to cover a wider and much larger group of employees, often at substantially increased costs, and in order to narrow the area of difference in the accounting treatment accorded in actual practice to annuity costs based on past services. Self-administered and informal plans which do not require payments to outside agencies are not specifically dealt with because of their special features and lack of uniformity. The principles set forth herein, however, are generally applicable to those plans as well.

3. Charges with respect to pension costs based on past services have often been made to surplus on the grounds that such payments are indirectly compensation for services and, since the services upon which the payments are computed were performed in the past, the compensation should not be permitted to affect any period or periods other than those in which the services involved were performed. In other cases all annuity costs based on past services have been charged to income in the period of the plan's inauguration as a current cost of originating the plan. In still other cases the position has been taken that a pension plan cannot bring the anticipated benefits in the future unless past as well as future services are given recognition and,

accordingly, annuity costs based on past services have been spread over a period of present and future years. The last method is the one permitted under provisions of the Internal Revenue Code.*

4. The committee believes that, even though the calculation is based on past services, costs of annuities based on such services are generally incurred in contemplation of present and future services, not necessarily of the individual affected but of the organization as a whole and, therefore, should be charged to the present and future periods benefited. This belief is based on the assumption that although the benefits flowing from pension plans are intangible, they are nevertheless real. The element of past services is one of the important considerations of most pension plans and costs incurred on account of such services contribute to the benefits gained by the adoption of a plan. It is usually expected that such benefits will include better employee morale, the removal of superannuated employees from the payroll, and the attraction and retention of more desirable personnel, all of which should result in improved operations.

5. The committee, accordingly, is of the opinion that:

(a) Costs of annuities based on past services should be allocated to current and future periods; provided, however, that if they are not sufficiently material in amount to distort the results of operations in a single period, they may be absorbed in the current year.

(b) Costs of annuities based on past services should not be charged to surplus.

6. The committee does not intend that its recommendations shall require (a) a change in policy calling for charges to income rather than charges to reserves previously provided, or (b) that any recognition be given in the accounts of current or future periods to pension costs written off prior to the issuance of this bulletin.

The statement entitled "Pension Plans—Accounting for Annuity Costs Based on Past Services" was unanimously adopted by the twenty-one members of the committee.

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* See IRC Sec. 23 (p) (1) (A).

NOTES

1. Accounting Research Bulletins represent the considered opinion of at least two-thirds of the members of the committee on accounting procedure, reached on a formal vote after examination of the subject matter by the committee and the research department. Except in cases in which formal adoption by the Institute membership has been asked and secured, the authority of the bulletins rests upon the general acceptability of opinions so reached. (See Report of Committee on Accounting Procedure to Council, dated September 18, 1939.)

2. Recommendations of the committee are not intended to be retroactive, nor applicable to immaterial items. (See Bulletin No. 1, page 3.)

3. It is recognized also that any general rules may be subject to exception; it is felt, however, that the burden of justifying departure from accepted procedures must be assumed by those who adopt other treatment. (See Bulletin No. 1, page 3.)