

## City seeks to shift its health insurance for police

By Josh Baugh

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City officials in contract negotiations with the police union laid out a proposal Thursday that would move police officers to the same health insurance plan as civilian employees.

The San Antonio Police Officers Association and the city made little headway during the daylong negotiations that are expected to last months.

Among the city's other proposals are limiting the amount of tuition reimbursement an officer can seek and removing a portion of the contract that guides the two sides through a potential impasse during negotiations.

It's never been used before, but the impasse clause eventually could lead to a vote by San Antonio residents on how to move forward with a new contract.

In turn, SAPOA attorney Craig Deats offered up 16 portions of the lengthy current contract that the union would like to duplicate in the new contract without making substantive changes.

Bettye Lynn and Jeff Londa, San Antonio's two lead negotiating attorneys, said the city only could agree to two of the 16 — the preamble and the no-strike clauses, which prohibits cops from walking off the job.

The volley of proposals came in the second daylong bargaining meeting as the two sides haggle over a new police contract.

The current collective-bargaining agreement, or CBA, expires Sept. 30. This year's negotiations are particularly heated, in part, because City Manager Sheryl Sculley last summer said the public-safety budget would overrun the general fund by 2031.

She has continually said that moving uniform personnel off their current health-care benefits — in which they pay no monthly premiums and have minimal deductibles for themselves, their spouses and their children — and offering them the same health-care plan as civilian employees could save \$15 million or more annually.

The city's negotiating team proposed striking the entire health benefits section of the CBA and replacing it with a single sentence: "The city will provide the same employee and family health benefits offered by the city to its civilian employees, with the same premium structure."

Civilian employees pay about 30 percent of their health care costs.

"We have a health plan for the police that has no premiums for employees and dependents. That's virtually unheard of in the private workforce in San Antonio. It's unheard of in other cities in Texas," Londa said. "It needs to change."

Union officials have said they understand the need to address rising health care costs, but Deats said he needs more information before he can talk to union members about what the city proposal actually means. He asked if the city knows how much the change would cost cops.

"It's all part of the overall compensation package. It's money in, money out," he said.

The city's proposal doesn't look at all appealing to police officers. Deats pointed out that the city can increase costs on its civilian employees without a limit.

As the two sides sat in a conference room at the Convention Center debating health care coverage, the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce held a news conference a block away, where it released results of a citywide poll on whether firefighters and police officers ought to pay a portion of their health care premiums.

The chamber commissioned Austin-based Baseline and Associates to determine public opinion in San Antonio. The firm found 57 percent of respondents in a telephone poll favored a proposal requiring uniform employees to pay a portion of their health-care insurance premiums.

The percentage of proponents increased to 65 percent after hearing "informative statements" on the issue.

Back at the negotiating table, Deats said the union plans to counter with its own proposal on how to handle increasing medical costs.

"We're trying to be responsible citizens, too," he said.