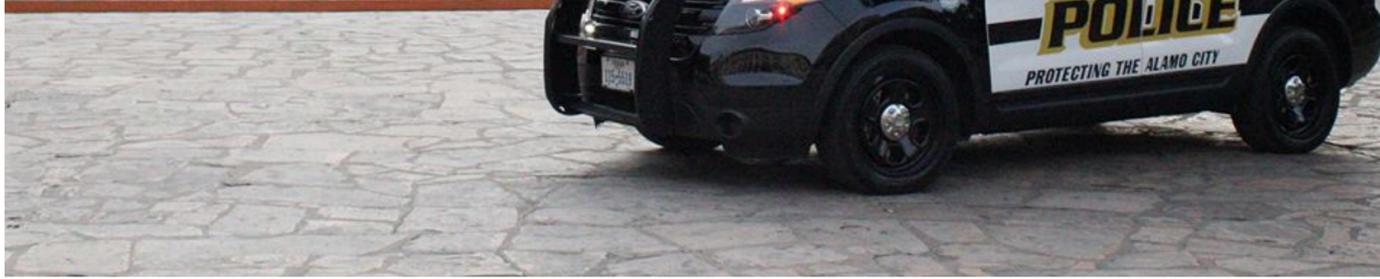


Police Talks Abruptly Canceled After Union Changes Lawyers

Robert Rivard on 15 April, 2014 at 01:05





The most anticipated session in collective bargaining talks between the City of San Antonio and the [San Antonio Police Officers Association](#) that was set for today was canceled by the police union after its newly retained lawyer emailed a letter ([download a PDF copy here](#)) to city negotiators canceling all “bargaining sessions preset by the parties.”

The late Friday afternoon email was written by the union’s new negotiator, Ron DeLord, a Georgetown attorney who describes himself as a “historian, author and police union consultant” on his [website](#).

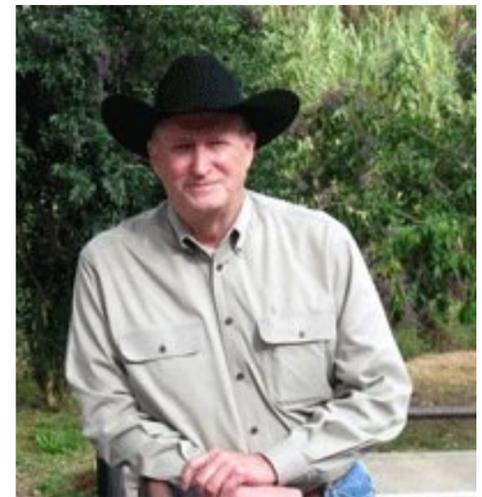
He writes and publishes the [Gospel According to DeLord blog](#) and has a Tuesday evening program on [POLICEPAY Network](#), an Internet radio broadcast.

While DeLord states that his hiring last week left him unprepared for Tuesday’s scheduled bargaining session, the language of his letter suggests that more is at stake than one canceled session. The notification to cancel all scheduled sessions for April and May suggests that union officials are reconsidering their commitment to engage in good faith bargaining as outlined in a Ground Rules agreement both sides signed in March.

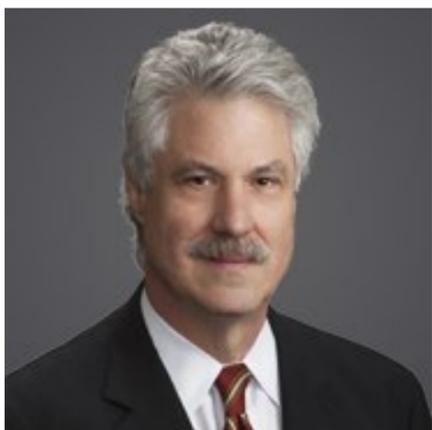
The cancellation by the police union on Friday follows Wednesday’s lawsuit filed by the firefighters union that seeks to stop city officials from collecting more information about dependents covered by the city’s health care insurance. The union won a temporary restraining order against the city and a full hearing is scheduled for April 23.

[Read more: [Firefighters Dig In, Even Before Sitting Down](#)]

After the ground rules agreement was signed, collective bargaining talks on a new police contract to replace the one set to expire Sept. 30 were held on April 3 and 7, and were scheduled to be held April 15, Tuesday and April 29, with a break for Easter and Fiesta. Talks were also scheduled for May 5, 13 and 19. The status of those future sessions is now unclear.



Ron Delord. Courtesy photo.



Houston labor lawyer Jeff Londa, representing the City of San Antonio.

The unexpected cancellation set off an email exchange ([download a PDF copy here](#)) between DeLord and Houston attorney Jeff Londa, the city’s lead negotiator. Londa advised DeLord that he was violating the Ground Rules agreement by acting unilaterally and ignoring language in the agreement that states, “[t]he parties may mutually agree to changes in this schedule and additional dates to meet.” Londa wrote that the long break over Fiesta, requested by the union, will give DeLord time to prepare for the April 29 session.

Both sides were expected to make detailed presentations Tuesday on the health care insurance benefits the police receive under the current contract and proposals by the city to curtail rising costs that have pushed public safety spending to nearly 67 percent of the general fund budget. City negotiators want police to accept provisions standard in most health care insurance plans, including payment of monthly premiums and higher co-pays.

Union negotiator [Craig Deats](#), an Austin-based attorney, has argued in previous bargaining sessions that any health care costs shifted to police officers should be offset by pay raises. It now appear Deats no longer represents the police union, although union officials have not released a statement since DeLord sent Londa and Fort Worth attorney Bettye Lynn, also on the city’s team, the cancellation notice.

Collective bargaining attorneys often are hired from other cities because local attorneys do not want to take adversarial, sometimes contentious positions against either the city or unions which can affect working relationships long afterwards, according to one local attorney who is closely watching negotiations.

The all-day focus on health care costs scheduled for Tuesday was expected to be a revealing session, with the city's benefits expert planning to detail changes to the plan that city leaders believe are essential while the union expert was expected to challenge the city's claims that rising health care costs cannot be sustained without negatively impacting other city operations and possible even its coveted AAA bond rating.

At the foundation of the current contract negotiations is the warning that has been raised over several budget cycles in recent years by City Manager Sheryl Sculley that the city cannot sustain its current rate of public safety spending. San Antonio currently spends 65 percent of its General Fund budget, which is nearly \$1 billion, on uniformed personnel. That number was only 36 percent when the first collective bargaining agreement between the city and police and fire fighters in 1975-76. Other Texas cities spend substantially less.



San Antonio City Manager
Sheryl Sculley

Sculley told City Council last year that public safety costs would eat up 100 percent of the General Fund by 2031 at the current rate of growth in costs, driven by rising health care costs, and public safety retirement and pension obligations the city faces.

The matter is finally coming to a head as the current five-year contract nears an end. Mayor Julián Castro responded to Sculley's warnings by appointing the [City's Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force](#) last August, which recently presented its report to City Council. Union representatives on the task force issue a minority report, but declined to present it to City Council and instead engaged in some name-calling directed against Sculley.

[Read More: [Union's Name Calling Can't Obscure the Numbers](#)]

The unions have enjoyed the current level of benefits since 1988 when they won many of the concessions now at issue. In fairness to the rank and file and the union officials who represent them, no one wants to surrender benefits hard-won 25 years ago.

A recent survey released by the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce showed a clear majority of citizens favor police and firefighters shouldering more of their own health care costs in a new contract.

**Featured/top image: Photo courtesy of SAPD.*

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