

San Antonio Express-News

Tax-funded divorces for SAPD, really?

By Josh Brodesky

August 15, 2014

Ding dong, the streetcar is dead.

Time to focus on other issues like, you know, the public safety divorce fund!

The city pays \$32 a month per officer into a pre-paid legal plan. The fund covers anything, really, except suing the city. It's often used for divorces and child custody cases.

Such benefits are common with employers, but rarely so rich. And that's, of course, the underlying issue as public safety and the city spar over health care costs and benefits.

Public safety fought the streetcar, which they characterized as a big symbol of misplaced priorities and wasteful spending. Police cars instead of streetcars, right? But little symbols count, too.

And the divorce fund, although small, is symbolic of a dynamic at play that the public safety associations have yet to adequately address: the sentiment that police and firefighters receive benefits way out of line with the tax base.

These include nearly free health care for public safety workers and their family members, a clothing allowance that doubled in five years from \$720 to \$1,440, an 18 percent pay raise for 30-year veterans so they can spike their pensions and even education bonuses for officers who don't complete their degrees.

It's hard to imagine public safety can't see why taxpayers might not want to pay for their personal legal issues or reward them for not finishing college. But you never know about these things, and there is an election on the horizon.

"We will only help candidates who support public safety," Mike Helle, president of the San Antonio Police Officers Association, recently declared on YouTube.

In late July, Helle sent an email to Mayor Ivy Taylor and council that said, in part, "Contrary to any rumors, our issues are with management actions which we feel have not been sanctioned and endorsed by Council. We pray that a voice of reason will prevail."

So far, though, council seems pretty darn reasonable in wanting to control skyrocketing health care costs. Taylor and three other council members — Rey Saldaña, Ron Nirenberg and Rebecca

Viagran — recently sent a letter to Helle backing up City Manager Sheryl Sculley.

“We have a council with a pretty strong spine to get something done here,” Saldaña said.

Here's how Councilman Joe Krier, who didn't sign the letter, put it: “I'm in sync with them, and my sense is the entire council is in sync.”

Despite all the public posturing, Saldaña said he believes the police officers association will work with the city to “find a proverbial middle ground.”

One that ensures police contribute toward their health care costs, but also receive benefits above and beyond civilian staff. These are stressful and dangerous jobs.

He was less optimistic about the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association, which has yet to come to the table.

What seems to be missing from the police and firefighter rhetoric is awareness that they not only have a commitment to public safety and their benefits, but also the fiscal health of the city. They are sensitive to looking greedy, but have yet to publicly extend an olive branch.

“The city manager, and her team, has done everything she possibly could to make us look like we're a bunch of greedy bastards trying to break the city of San Antonio,” Helle said in that YouTube video.

He likened this fight to the last stand at the Alamo for public safety unions across Texas.

“If San Antonio falls, they all fall,” he said.

Helle's bombastic comments stand in sharp contrast to recent ones made by Bryan Jeffries, chief of Professional Firefighters of Arizona, about ballooning pension costs there.

“It is critical for our state, for the taxpayers and for the next generation that will be here long after we are gone, that we repair this,” he told the New York Times. “I know intellectually that with these ballooning payments, I feel a direct conflict with the oath I took to protect the citizens.”

Just imagine if Helle or Chris Steele, president of SA's Professional Firefighters Association, said that about their health care bennies?

Why, they just might win some public support.