

San Antonio Express-News

Information wars aggravate budget fight

By Brian Chasnoff

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On Monday, Chris Steele, president of the local fire union, sent the city an open records request that would make a hardened investigative journalist blush.

Actually 32 separate requests in one, it's a thicket of questions seeking detailed information about health care benefits.

An example, number 13: "How many patients were diagnosed with any form of cancer among the dependent population of the (City of San Antonio) civilian employees' dependents in the past fifteen (15) years? Please break down your answer by each designated year and into the following categories: children under the age of 26, spouses, and domestic partners. List out the diagnoses types for each."

By now, the city should be used to this.

Since October, the police and fire unions have submitted 53 open records requests. The city has fully released 50 of them.

The city itself wants information from uniform employees, yet it is struggling to receive it.

This information war is being waged as the city and the unions stare each other down over health care costs, waiting for the other to blink as a council vote on the budget looms.

City Manager Sheryl Sculley wants council to approve spending \$10,000 on health care per uniform employee. The city now spends more than \$13,000 on health care per uniform employee versus \$7,300 for civilians.

Negotiations between the city and police have broken down; the fire union has refused even to meet at the table.

The flow of information that could inform the city's financial future has also been stanchied.

In February, Bryan Layton, assistant director of the city's Office of Management & Budget, sent a request to Warren Schott, executive director of the Fire and Police Pension Fund.

The city pays significantly into this fund.

Layton asked for information about each of the 1,877 retired participants.

Schott responded: Find it yourself.

“Monthly annuities can be computed with information readily available to the City of San Antonio, without placing the Pension Fund at risk of releasing personal information which may lead to the identity of the individual retirees/beneficiaries and their respective, personal elections for how they wish for their defined benefits to be paid,” he wrote.

Deputy City Manager Erik Walsh shot back in a March 20 letter:

“The contributions received by the Fire & Police Pension Fund are public dollars and the City has a right to request and receive the documents,” he wrote to Schott. “Please advise us as soon as possible when the documents will be available.”

Five months later, they still aren't.

The city is also stymied in its efforts to audit a prepaid legal plan for police and firefighters.

With tax dollars, the city pays \$1.5 million a year into a fund that covers personal legal expenses for uniform employees such as divorces and child custody cases. In March, the council's Audit Committee authorized the review, which began April 3.

At the time, City Auditor Kevin Barthold said it would take no more than three months to complete.

“It's an ongoing audit,” he told me on Friday.

I asked Barthold if the plan's administrator was refusing to release any information.

“I can't answer that,” he said. “We're working through our process to get the information that we need. We've received some, and we still need some.”

I turned to District 6 Councilman Ray Lopez, who serves on both the Audit Committee and as secretary of the pension fund.

“I wouldn't call myself a mediator (between the city and uniform employees),” he said. “But I'm stuck in the middle.”

In both cases, the city is seeking “granular” information.

“I know their general response (to the city) is, 'We provide information at the level we feel compelled to do that. If you need more granular information, we don't feel compelled to do that.' And they're citing privacy issues,” Lopez said.

Lopez added, “Short of the word paranoia — maybe it's skepticism — it comes into play every time.... My hope is that cooler heads will prevail. My suggestion to the city is to explain the need for the information. And stay out of court.”