

San Antonio Express-News

Unions need to return to negotiations

Express-News Editorial Board

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Municipal budgets are inherently political documents.

Sure, they are based on projected revenues and service demands, fee increases and cost-cutting measures. But the process of arriving at a balanced budget is political.

That's especially true this year for the city of San Antonio in light of the impasse between the city and public safety unions over health care costs.

With negotiations stalled, City Manager Sheryl Sculley has recommended council spend \$10,000 on health care per uniform employee. At present, the city spends more than \$13,000 on health care per uniform employee versus \$7,300 for civilians.

Sculley has been pushing to move public safety workers to civilian health care plans. City Council has also said public safety costs should not exceed two-thirds of the city's general fund.

The concern is due to soaring public safety costs that could crowd out other services such as parks, libraries and street maintenance.

Here's where the rubber meets the road: The city must pass a balanced budget in September with or without the public safety unions.

So far, it appears to be without them.

Negotiations with the San Antonio Police Officers Association fell apart earlier this summer. The San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association has yet to begin negotiations.

Mike Helle, president of the police association, is correct when he says the \$10,000 figure is a placeholder. "She can budget \$5 a head, all well knowing that that budget is not accurate," he told Express-News staff writer Josh Baugh. "It's just a number that she's putting in there."

But what else is Sculley supposed to do with negotiations stalled and a deadline looming?

By plugging in \$10,000, Sculley is meeting public safety in the middle, even if the unions can't bring themselves to meet at the table.

One reason Sculley can do this — or at least can make the argument — is a clause in the public

safety contracts, which states, in caps, that council can change any benefits in a budget year.

Helle has said the unions will fight this, arguing another part of the contract states the city is prohibited from cutting benefits. That will likely have to be settled in court. But taxpayers would be better served by having negotiations resume (or start).

The community values public safety workers. They put their lives at risk for our safety. But their health benefits are excessively rich and out of line with the tax base they serve.

The budget Sculley presented avoids layoffs, increases street maintenance, boosts parks and library services, holds the line on Animal Care Services and funds adult literacy programs.

These are crucial services that improve San Antonio's quality of life and should not be crowded out of the budget so public safety workers, and their families, can have gold-plated health care benefits. That's a luxury taxpayers don't get and can't afford.