

San Antonio Express-News

Look at the facts in contract talks

By Rey Saldaña, for the Express-news

December 6, 2014

“The fight must be personalized — there must always be a boogeyman that is in the cross-hairs.”

This statement, which sounds like one given before the start of a war, comes from a popular book circulated among public safety union leadership titled “Police Union Power, Politics, and Confrontation in the 21st Century.” The book is a playbook on how to negotiate a favorable contract for police union members.

Why does this matter? Because the author serves as the San Antonio police union’s lead negotiator. This also provides insight as to why police officers and firefighters still have no contract.

I take no issue with the hiring of the negotiator, but I do take issue with the tactics described in the book to use power, money and politics to ensure that talks remain stalled, facts remain clouded, and city officials feel the strength and intimidation of the police and fire unions.

As such, it comes as no surprise that the president of the police union refused a truce requested by the mayor and is instead choosing to continue the bullying and name calling. It is this adversarial attitude that has dominated discussions recently.

In lieu of genuinely addressing the problem, all that we’ve seen are sound bites, grandstanding and attempts at character assassination. Instead of beginning from a place of division, negotiations need to refocus and start from a place of common understanding. The only way for this to be achieved is by looking at facts that cannot be disputed.

One such fact is the city’s commitment to public safety. A look at our current budget, and budget of the past decade, are indicative of the high value we place on public safety and the risk associated with the job.

At its current rate of 66 percent of our general fund budget, the city has sent a clear message that public safety is a top priority; to state otherwise would be disingenuous. In fact, in comparison to other large cities, San Antonio is among the highest in the state.

Another fact, while perhaps not as popular, pertains to public safety costs in relation to the general fund.

It is simply wrong to assert that public safety costs have remained stable. It is a fact that public safety expenses have grown faster than general fund revenues over the last 10 years. There is no ambiguity to this statement. To those who may doubt this, one simply needs to look at audited actuarials included in City Council adopted budgets, i.e. a receipt of all city spending.

More pointedly, particular attention should be paid to the rising cost of uniformed active health care over the last 10 years.

Such rising health care costs are not a surprise nor are they disputed. As stated in the introduction of the negotiator's book, with respect to rising police health care costs: "Public administrators have begun to realize that the costs of employee health care and pensions are no longer sustainable at current levels, and that other options must be explored."

As a public administrator, City Manager Sheryl Sculley has recognized this for several years and has decided, with the support of the mayor and council, to confront this difficult reality when others have not.

Doing so recognizes that our residents also demand critical city services such as street maintenance, drainage upgrades, code enforcement, animal control, and increased library and park upgrades. These are especially important for historically underserved communities like District 4.

Our city manager is responsible for balancing a budget and managing these concerns for 10 districts, she will not be reprimanded nor fired for doing her job.

Let us move past the posturing and move forward together toward a common goal. Let us leave the destructive rhetoric for the bookstands and return to the negotiation table, where at least we have the forum to debate the numbers and the facts.

Rey Saldaña represents City Council District 4.