

San Antonio Express-News

City manager tackling the tough work

By Ron Nirenberg, for the Express-news

December 8, 2014

There is no “us” versus “them” in resolving the city’s collective bargaining dispute because we all lose, especially the public, if nothing gets done. We must address the rising cost of health care to maintain a balanced budget and ensure future generations inherit a healthy, sustainable San Antonio.

That mission is what our city management, led by City Manager Sheryl Sculley, has been directed to achieve, and what it has achieved with remarkable success over the last decade.

Around the country, the news from cities in the United States is often troubling. Violent crime in Baltimore, street failure in Los Angeles, drought and air pollution in Fresno, and bankruptcy in Detroit — it seems that hardship does not spare cities of any size, in any place.

Here in San Antonio, however, our story is different. Despite formidable challenges, we have earned a reputation as a top-tier American City. We are the Alamo City, cradle of Texas liberty and Military City, U.S.A, home base of America’s military-medical complex. We are the city where teamwork wins championships and where we work together to solve big problems, like providing shelter for evacuees when our federal government cannot.

Others have referred to San Antonio as “on the rise.” I think it describes our city perfectly. We weathered the worst of the Great Recession, and our economy is growing faster than many cities our size. Success has been steady and building for several years.

As a council-manager government, the credit for this success belongs largely to city management.

During her tenure, alongside the last three mayors beginning with Phil Hardberger, City Manager Sheryl Sculley has led San Antonio to its strongest financial position in history, increasing reserves, eliminating waste, and lowering the property tax rate. Under Sculley’s leadership, the city has implemented strict ethics and campaign finance reform, established a public process that directs and oversees all major capital improvement projects, cooperated with local school districts to raise graduation rates and significantly reduced teen pregnancy and diabetes.

San Antonio unemployment ranks among the lowest in the country. Forbes Magazine named our city “Best for Business” in 2013. San Antonio is the only Top-10 city with a AAA bond rating from all three agencies, meaning more streets and infrastructure projects for every dollar spent. We enjoy the second lowest tax rate in Texas. Since 2006, we have decreased the number of civilian positions in city government by 15 percent while increasing uniformed public safety personnel by 13 percent. Everyone wants more “boots on the ground.” Strong financial management under Sculley is the only way that has happened.

We have protected more than 130,000 acres of sensitive Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone while diversifying our water supply, ensuring our long-term water needs are met for the next 40 to 60 years. We've landed major conventions and events, including the World Stem Cell Summit, the Final Four, Big League Weekend, Women in the World and UTSA football.

On this record, Sheryl Sculley has earned her reputation as one of the best city managers in the country. She has also earned the trust of the San Antonio public to confront the deepest, most difficult challenges, regardless of how uncomfortable it might be. Addressing skyrocketing health care costs is one of those challenges.

As a City Council, we have directed the manager to address the cost of health care benefits to keep our city's budget balanced and not become another community bankrupt by lack of attention to long term finances. This will allow us to keep up with all of the other services that citizens demand while ensuring we have resources enough to maintain the highest standards of public safety. It's fair to the public and it's important to public safety officials, whose benefits depend on the overall fiscal health of the city.

As a City Council, we can, we must and we will address these issues, with or without consensus. That is because whether or not it is popular, it is the right thing to do. San Antonio has the right management team to meet the challenge and continue building a premiere American city.

Ron Nirenberg is the District 8 City Council member.