
Council hears about growing public safety budget



By Josh Baugh

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SAN ANTONIO — In a substantial show of force, hundreds of police officers and firefighters packed City Hall on Wednesday as council members reviewed a task force study on public-safety workers' health care and pension benefits.

Former Councilman Reed Williams, chairman of a 13-member task force, told the council that police and fire budgets are increasing at a rate that exceeds revenue growth.

“We’re going in the wrong direction,” Williams said. “What I’m more or less pleading for here is the understanding that something needs to be done to change these numbers.”

The task force was formed last year after City Manager Sheryl Sculley told the City Council that the public-safety budget would consume the entire general fund by 2031 and said that active-duty medical benefits and a rich pension plan were significant reasons for the increase.

Backed by cops and firefighters wearing blue and red union shirts, San Antonio Police Officers Association President Mike Helle said Sculley created an “economic hysteria” last summer when she said that public safety would overrun the general fund.

For years, she has said she believes that uniform personnel need to pay a higher percentage of their health care costs.

As it stands now, uniform personnel pay no monthly premiums and cover about 9 percent of their

health care costs through deductibles and co-insurance. Their spouses and children also are covered under the plan. Civilian employees pay 30 percent of their health care costs.

Sculley repeatedly has said she wants to bring the uniform plans closer in line with plans for other city workers. But that takes negotiating new collective-bargaining agreements with the police and fire unions.

There's no talk about addressing the city's 2-1 funding ratio of pension contributions or prefunded retiree health care, which are governed by state law.

Helle said he wasn't impressed with Williams' presentation because it left out details important to the unions, such as cost overruns that they have no control over. But Helle acknowledged that public-safety expenses are growing.

Chris Steele, the president of the San Antonio Professional Fire Fighters Association, said the expenses that are controlled by the union contracts, such as salaries and active-duty health care, "are going down."

That's not the case, according to city data. Between 2003 and 2013, the city's cost of active-duty health care claims rose from \$21.46 million to \$51.71 million, equating to a 141 percent rise, or a compounded annual growth of 9.2 percent.

During that same time period, civilian health care costs rose from \$31 million to \$43 million, a 39.6 percent increase.

The sizes of those workforces are going in opposite directions. Sculley has cut the size of the civilian staff and increased the number of public-safety personnel.

Council members generally appeared sympathetic to the unions' concerns but also noted that they have to ensure the city remains solvent.

Four members of the task force who represent active-duty and retired police and fire personnel submitted what they dubbed a "minority report" generally challenging the findings of the task force, which met eight times over the course of several months.

At their last meeting, task force members continued to argue over the accuracy of the numbers.

Mayor Julián Castro told the unions Wednesday that they would have an opportunity to present their perspective on health care, retirement benefits and other issues before collective-bargaining negotiations begin.

The existing contracts expire at the end of September, but they include a clause that keeps them in place up to 10 years if they're not replaced with new agreements.

Councilman Rey Saldaña said concessions need to be made.

“We need to empower our city manager to have those discussions, to go into negotiations with a firm grasp of what is in the city's best interest — understanding that if anybody should be getting rich benefits, if anybody should be a priority, it should be our police and firefighters.”

“We just want to be able to afford what we decide to promise them,” he said.

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