Council must be firm about benefits changes

City of San Antonio Healthcare and Retirements Benefit Task Force Chairman Reed Williams and City Manager Sheryl Sculley discuss police and fire health care and retirement costs with the Express-News Editorial Board.

Express-News Editorial Board

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SAN ANTONIO — Is San Antonio on pace to become the Detroit of the Sun Belt?

We don't think so, and neither does a city task force studying pension and health care costs for public safety employees.

But the rich pension and health care benefits San

Antonio's police and firefighters receive are consuming an enormous portion of the general fund. If left unchecked, they will eventually overwhelm this city.

Already, they are crowding out other essential city services, such as literacy centers, parks and recreation programs, and libraries. Addressing public safety costs, particularly sharp increases in health care, is absolutely necessary to ensure this is a great city for decades to come.

While public safety will remain the city's core mission, a long-term balance must be achieved.

With so much at stake, City Council must be clear about the outcomes it wants to gain through upcoming contract negotiations. Council must then hold firm and not undercut management by interfering with negotiations at the behest of union heads.

Public safety, including civilian support staff, consumes about 70 percent of the general fund, which is about $1 billion. If nothing changes, city officials have said, those costs will eventually consume the entire general fund. Health care benefits will be the focus of negotiations.

Over the past decade, the city's medical costs for police and firefighters have skyrocketed from $21.46 million to nearly $52 million.

By comparison, health care costs for civilian city employees have only increased from $15.74 million in 2003 to $20.75 million in 2013.

Simply put, the Cadillac plans uniformed workers receive are unheard of by today's standards.

Uniformed workers don't have to pay premiums for either themselves or their spouses and families. They have deductibles of $250 for an individual and $500 for families. In other major Texas cities, civilian staff and uniformed workers share the same plans, city officials said. But not in San Antonio.

It should be noted, these negotiations have nothing to do with benefits for on-the-job injuries or

tragedies.

Because of the nature of their jobs, police and firefighters deserve excellent health care benefits. Their work is strenuous, stressful and dangerous. But routine health benefits also shouldn't be so out of line with those of other city workers, much less the tax base supporting their salaries.

The public, of course, has seen a significant increase in emergency response fees to help cover costs.

Along these lines, we see no reason why uniformed workers shouldn't pay premiums and increased deductibles, especially for dependents. They also should take part in a wellness program. This hardly seems unreasonable. In fact, it's common.

"There needs to be some involvement, personally, with this program," said former Councilman Reed Williams, who led the city task force studying this issue.

Just by bringing uniformed employees to the city's civilian health plan, "We would conservatively save $10 million to $15 million a year," City Manager Sheryl Sculley told us.

An agreement placing new hires in a less expensive plan and some modest changes for existing uniformed employees is a reasonable approach.

This is just health care. Addressing pension costs will be much more difficult because it will take legislative action. We support forming another task force to continue studying the pension issue.

This is about the city's long-term economic health and the need to balance police and fire with other essential services. Council should set clear goals for management, then stay out of the way as negotiations play out.

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