

NEWS

Cisneros calls on city, public-safety unions to negotiate contracts

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Former Mayor Henry Cisneros, the newly minted chairman of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, called on the city and the public-safety unions Monday to end their stalemates, return to the negotiating table and hash out new contracts for the police and fire departments.

He also denied that a recent controversial poll conducted by the chamber was a “push poll” designed to sway public sentiment. The chamber had at first denied any involvement in recent polling efforts and then admitted that it had conducted a survey to gauge public sentiment on the police and fire contracts.

“I can tell you, personally, I do not believe that was a push poll. A push poll is done in a way that it is very, very broad, reaches a lot of people for the purpose of trying to influence opinion. This was less than 1,000 persons surveyed in a city of 1.4 million people,” Cisneros

said. “And it asked questions really predicated on both sides of the issue in order to draw forth people’s opinions.

“There may have been a question or two, that when you look at them independently, look like they’re pushing in a direction by saying, 'Would you pay more property taxes in order to pay fire and police more?' It sounds like you’re raising an extraneous question. But it was one out of I think 70 questions on the survey.”

Neither Mike Helle, president of the San Antonio Police Officers Association, nor Chris Steele, president of the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association, could be reached for comment.

In his new role, Cisneros said he believes there’s common ground to be found between the public safety unions and the city. Negotiations between the city and the police union fell apart twice last year and haven’t restarted since the city filed a lawsuit against both unions. City officials say they believe a 10-year evergreen clause, which carries the expired contract forward for a decade if a new one isn’t signed, violates the Texas Constitution and have asked a district judge to rule on the matter.

Meanwhile, the fire union has yet to agree to begin its initial negotiations.

Cisneros also said the chamber is sponsoring 30- and 60-second radio advertisements and publishing an ad in the Thursday edition of the San Antonio Express-

News that calls on both sides to rekindle talks. The radio ads say there is “deep respect” here for public safety personnel and that San Antonio has one of the best city managers in the country. Though the ads don’t mention her by name, they say City Manager Sheryl Sculley has put the city on a prudent fiscal course.

Through the ads, the chamber says public safety personnel need to share in the rising costs of health care, that the city needs to maintain the cost of public safety at “fiscally responsible levels” and that extraneous benefits for sworn personnel — from tuition reimbursements to a legal fund — that are outside “the norm” need to be curtailed.

Cisneros was mayor when the original contracts that offered the now-controversial benefits were approved. He said those benefits were important then to change the course of the departments and doesn’t regret approving them. He also noted that a dozen contracts have since been approved by succeeding mayors and councils.

“Clearly, times change and some calibration is required.”

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