
In city's benefits debate, tensions are rising

SAN ANTONIO — Police and fire union officials are reacting with increasing alarm to the findings of a City Council advisory task force set to make recommendations next month on the future of the city's retirement and health-care benefits.

The issue is critical for San Antonio.

City Manager Sheryl Sculley has said public safety could consume 100 percent of the budget by 2031. Last week, a pension consultant to the task force predicted a similar scenario: If pay, staffing levels and benefits packages don't change for active and retired workers, public safety costs could eat up the entire city budget by 2040.

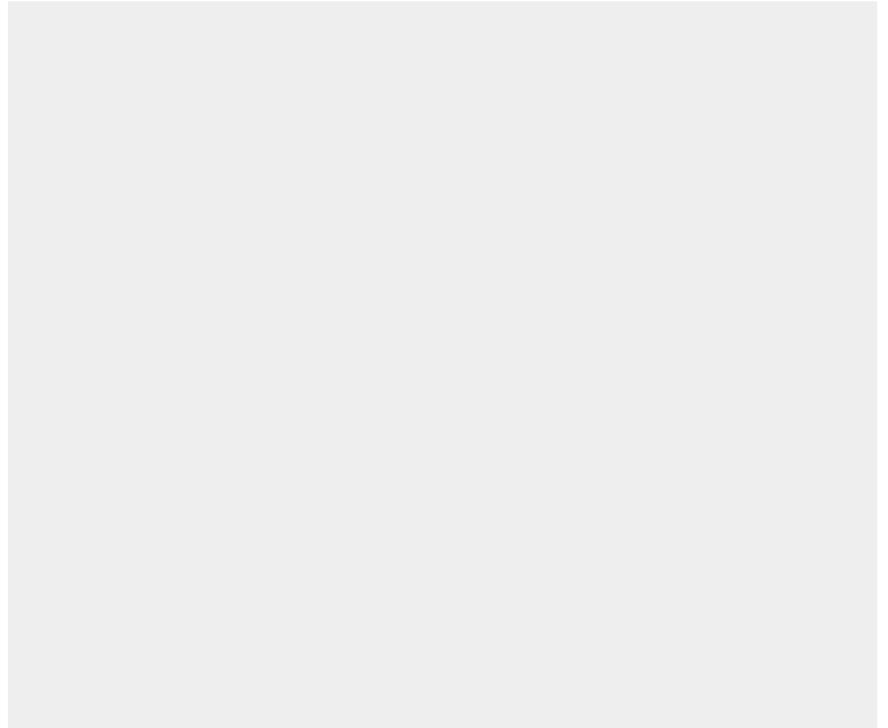
The task force, created in October by Mayor Julián Castro, has since uncovered a central culprit: rich health-care benefits for police and firefighters.

With collective bargaining negotiations between the city and unions beginning this month, the latter are going on the offensive.

Mike Helle, president of the San Antonio Police Officers Association, sent a letter to Sculley and Castro last week requesting, basically, that the task force back off.

“The SAPOA did not oppose the formation of the Task Force, and has in fact participated in its work to date,” he wrote. “However, it now seems apparent that, at least with regards to health care, the Task Force is examining issues that are the province of the Working Group.”

(The city and SAPOA are required to create a “health benefits working group.”)



“For that reason, SAPOA requests that the Working Group be formed immediately to address these issues,” Helle continued, “and that the Task Force discontinue any work which is the sole province of the Working Group.”

Sculley didn't budge.

“The topic of health care can, and should, continue to be discussed by the Mayor's Task Force in the context of their stated mission of how to deal with rising legacy costs in the short and long term,” she wrote to Helle. “The assignment of the Mayor's Task Force does not intrude into the province of negotiating health-care benefits through the collective bargaining process.”

(Sculley did agree in the letter to start discussing the formation of the working group.)

Two findings by the task force in particular show why health care is such a contentious topic — and why it's a primary reason public safety costs are ballooning.

For one, San Antonio is the only major city in Texas where uniform employees pay no health-care premiums for dependents and families. In Austin, for instance, families pay \$486; in Dallas, it's \$494.

And the city pays much more to provide health care for uniform employees than it does for its civilian employees. Per uniform employee, the city pays \$19,122 a year; per civilian employee, it pays \$7,080.

Among major cities in Texas, this is by far the widest gap.

Faced with these facts, unions must be prepared to make some concessions.

For now, Chris Steele, president of the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association, appears more interested in diminishing the task force's findings.

“The city wants to 'address' (health-care) concerns on its own terms and in an environment where it controls the information,” Steele wrote in a recent email, “and not under conditions where all information can be reviewed and discussed to reach a fair solution.

“I agree we need to talk about the elephant in the room,” he continued. “I believe the elephant is the massive growing debt the City is amassing in the other sections of the budget.”

Former councilman Reed Williams, chair of the task force, sees a different elephant.

“That is a bit of a distraction from the real reality of we have something growing in relationship to the available revenues,” he said on Friday.

The task force meets again on Monday; expect a factious process.

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