

OPINION

Lawsuit does not preclude contract talks

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Photo: William Luther /San Antonio Express-News



City and police union negotiators should get back to hammering out a contract.

Last November, the city of San Antonio asked a court to determine whether contracts with the San Antonio Police Officer's Association, or SAPOA, and the San Antonio Professional's Firefighter's Association, or SAPFFA — contracts which had expired on Sept. 30 — could remain in effect for another decade. The sole issue the court was asked to decide was whether this 10-year "evergreen" period stipulated by the expired contracts was so excessively long as to violate the Texas Constitution. The City Council directed the lawsuit to be filed following the recommendation of City Manager Sheryl Sculley.

On Tuesday, a City Council consideration request, or CCR, was submitted to the office of the City Clerk seeking withdrawal of that lawsuit. CCRs are used by members of City Council to begin the process of bringing an action forward for discussion and decision by the full Council.

I appreciate my colleague's focus and efforts in actively pursuing a resolution to the ongoing union negotiations, which began in March 2014 and are centered on fixing the pay and benefit provisions of a new contract. After more than nine months of stop-and-start negotiations, I understand the desire to take an action, any action, which would seem to promise some progress toward mutual agreement.

I am sure that most San Antonians are equally ready for an end to the finger-pointing and accusations that have accompanied the legal maneuvers. Unfortunately, although not unintentionally, the merits of both municipal and union positions have long since been relegated to a sideshow instead of sitting squarely in the spotlight where they belong. This is especially true in light of the reluctance on both sides to adhere to a truce in the battle for public attention and opinion.

While there may come an appropriate time to discuss abandoning the suit seeking legal determination about the

constitutionality of a 10-year evergreen period, I do not believe that time is now. SAPOA is currently in the midst of campaigns for the election of officers, which is scheduled for next week. The third-party review of fiscal projections I requested is also due this month. We should soon be on firmer footing for negotiations without resorting to unraveling the municipality's legal strategy.

The existence of the lawsuit, which is not expected to be settled for a number of months, relieves neither side from continuing the difficult yet necessary process of negotiating; absolves no one from our civic responsibilities to work together in the best interest of the taxpayers; does not abolish the obligation that we treat each other with respect. I have actively sought and will continue to seek the removal of politics and personal attacks from this process.

While the lawsuit has proved to be a lightning rod for arguments, it should not preclude reaching an agreement on the terms of a new contract within the next several months — a contract that is virtually certain to contain an evergreen clause, as their use is standard practice. To reiterate, I firmly believe it is in the city's best interest for contract negotiations to be concluded before municipal elections occur in May. Police and fire contracts should not be a campaign issue for current or aspiring council members.

If negotiating a new contract were easy, none of the parties to the existing agreement would have thought to include a decadelong evergreen clause. However, the council and I are

committed to clearing the path for all parties to come to a collective solution through focused negotiations. Among us, there may be differences of opinion on how to best resolve this issue, but there is clear consensus in the desire of this City Council to complete a contract that offers the best health care plan we can afford to our excellent public safety force.

Ivy Taylor is mayor of San Antonio.

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