

Public safety costs fiscal threat to city



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There are some tough decisions to be made in City Hall about the health care costs for uniformed employees.

Express-News Editorial Board

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SAN ANTONIO — As the city's task force on retirement and health care benefits moves toward making recommendations, one fact is clear: Today's police and firefighter health care packages are

richer than the city can afford over the long run.

Of course, San Antonio's uniformed employees, who risk their lives for the public, merit an excellent benefits package. Nobody is suggesting otherwise.

But today, police and firefighters pay zero health insurance premiums for themselves and their families. Additionally, they enjoy the lowest deductibles for uniformed employees of any major city in Texas.

Civilian city employees pay premiums and higher deductibles. It cost the city \$19,122 to provide health care for each uniformed employee in fiscal 2013, compared with \$7,080 per civilian worker.

If uniformed employees paid the same premiums and out-of-pocket costs as civilian employees, the city would save an estimated \$10 million to \$15 million annually.

Among major Texas cities, Houston comes closest to San Antonio's uniformed employee costs, paying \$12,343 for health care per position, according to an analysis done for the task force.

The issue involves routine health care — not on-the-job injuries.

Several scenarios have been used to project when public safety costs will consume 100 percent of the city budget. The projections depend on numerous variables, but estimates range from 2025 — if a recession occurs — to 2040 if recent trends continue.

Regardless of the exact date, public safety costs are on track to consume the entire city budget in the foreseeable future. Major property tax increases will be required if nothing is done to slow down the growth in public safety costs.

The city's health care costs increased by 10 percent in fiscal 2013, at a time when the rise in health care costs slowed nationally to 3.3 percent for the private sector, the task force's consultant reported.

An analysis presented to the task force showed that civilians' costs increased 1.8 percent while costs for

police increased 31 percent and firefighter costs jumped 9.8 percent.

One approach is to require new uniformed hires to begin paying premiums and a larger share of health care costs more in line with civilians, leaving the current plan implemented through collective bargaining in place for current employees.

Current uniformed employees could also be asked to participate more in cost sharing.

The task force faces difficult decisions, and City Council must follow with tough decisions as well. The police and firefighter contracts expire in September. Now is the time to deal with the issue. The status quo is untenable.