

# More bargaining, but still no police contract

## News

### Officials hopeful, but deal looks unlikely

By [Josh Baugh](#)

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The San Antonio Police Officers Association and city's labor-contract negotiations remained in a stalemate Wednesday as the two sides close in on Mayor Ivy Taylor's July 31 deadline to reach an agreement.

If the two sides aren't able to agree on the terms of a new contract by then — and it appears unlikely they will — then the city's public-safety personnel will not receive a bonus in fiscal year 2015, which ends Sept. 30.

The city has reserved about \$8.5 million to pay one-time bonuses to police officers and firefighters if they agree to new contracts by the end of the month. But Friday appears to be the last day the cops and the city will negotiate because of scheduling conflicts on the union's side, and the firefighters have yet to even come to the negotiating table.

Despite flaring tempers during Wednesday's negotiating sessions, city officials say they're still hopeful they can reach a deal and haven't indicated how that bonus money would be reprogrammed if they don't. The city's negotiating team made another proposal to the police union, tweaking wage increases and health-insurance premiums to address issues raised by union leaders.

“This is a good deal. We need to get past rhetoric at the table,” Deputy City Manager Erik Walsh said. “It was tense today, and I think it was done on purpose. We have a July 31 request from the mayor to get this contract done, and we're willing to stay here tonight if we have to. Bring us a counter today; we're ready to counter again if we need to, and that's why we pushed to continue meeting today.”

Mike Helle, the union's president, all but ruled out a conclusion to negotiations by month's end, or by Friday.

“We didn't put the deadline down. You'd have to talk to the mayor — she's the one who put the deadline down,” Helle said. “We are going to negotiate for as long as it takes.”

Helle signaled that his negotiating team would not schedule meetings for nearly the entire month of August because of the absence of Ron DeLord, the union's chief negotiator.

“When he returns, we’ll be ready to go,” Helle said.

Wednesday’s negotiations differed somewhat from previous sessions. There was very little discussion about the minutiae of salary and health care proposals. The arguments focused, rather, on what city officials say the union got wrong in its calculations for the contract proposal.

City officials say the union made several errors, including applying savings from a less-costly health care plan for 12 months rather than nine during the first year of the contract, and a “\$6 million mathematical error in calculating wages” for fiscal year 2016.

In interviews, Helle chided city officials for publicly airing the errors, and Walsh rebutted that he and Budget Director Maria Villagomez laid out the problems with the union’s proposal in a lengthy meeting Tuesday.

Still, Helle said he believes the two sides are making progress, even if it’s “at a snail’s pace, one inch at a time.”

The two sides have been negotiating on-again, off-again, for more than 18 months. Early on, city negotiators stated that the City Council has the prerogative to take away public-safety personnel’s health insurance, which is part of the fire and police unions’ collective-bargaining agreements, through the annual budget process and replace it with plans provided to the city’s civilian employees. Under their current plan, police officers and firefighters pay no monthly premiums and very little of the overall cost of health care for themselves, their spouses and their children.

Police union officials have said they believe their health insurance is guaranteed under the contract and cannot be taken away through council action.

On Wednesday, Walsh said there hasn’t been discussion about taking that route. He said he’s still wearing his “optimistic hat” that they’ll strike a deal. When the council returns from summer break in August, they’ll begin hashing out the details of the fiscal year 2016 budget. And one of the largest looming issues is how much the public-safety budget will be.

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