

Council could muscle up on cops, firefighters' health care



Photo: JERRY LARA, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

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San Antonio Mayor Ivy Taylor, left, and City Manager Sheryl Sculley, center, speak to the San Antonio Express-News Editorial Board on the city's negotiations with the San Antonio Police union, Tuesday, July 21, 2015. On the right is Office of Management and Budget Director Maria Villagomez.

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Mayor Ivy Taylor said that as contract negotiations with the police union drag unresolved into another budget year, the City Council should consider voting to take away public-safety personnel's rich health benefits and replace them with more affordable ones.

The City Council will likely discuss whether to take action during upcoming budget meetings, Taylor and City Manager Sheryl Sculley told the San Antonio Express-News Editorial Board on Tuesday.

Whether the City Council has the authority to take away the health care coverage that the unions have negotiated is unclear and likely would ultimately be decided by a district judge. Sculley told the newspaper

on Tuesday that the city's contacts with the union contradict themselves.

One portion of the contract states that such benefits are negotiated under the contract while another part of the contract states that the council can make necessary changes to health care coverage.

The idea that the council would deliberate such action shocked Mike Helle, president of the San Antonio Police Officers Association. If the council decided to switch out their health care plans, Helle said it would result in a lawsuit.

“I think it's unfortunate that the mayor would even make those types of comments, especially when we're at the negotiating table,” Helle said. “If she can get council's approval to do it, it would certainly put us in the courtroom again. We would certainly be filing an injunction to stop her. I'm quite surprised that she would even be suggesting that as an option on the table.”

Under their contracts, police officers and firefighters pay no monthly insurance premiums for themselves, their spouses or their children. Through co-pays and deductibles, sworn personnel pay about 9 percent of their health care costs while their civilian counterparts at the city pay about 30 percent.

Taylor noted that the council had discussed voting to change public safety's health insurance a year ago, but directed city staff to instead continue working on new contracts. But now, more than 18 months into negotiations with the police union — and no contract talks to date with the fire union — the council's appetite to address growing health care costs outside of negotiations may be growing.

“We will be discussing that with the City Council,” Taylor said. “I think given the length of the negotiating time at this point, that is an option that we should discuss.”

Meanwhile, Taylor chided Helle in a letter she sent him Tuesday in response to correspondence he'd sent to the City Council the day before, lashing out at Sculley. In her letter, Taylor defended the city manager and pushed for the union to return to the bargaining table and hash out a deal before the end of the month. In the letter, which she sent to local media, Taylor outlined her hopes for a quick end to negotiations.

“In conclusion, I will reiterate that we will not spend time debating this in the media, making accusations of personal attacks or focusing on staff personalities or motivations,” Taylor wrote. “The only motivation from City Council, City staff and the City bargaining team is to arrive at a deal that is fair for all and protects our financial viability for the future.”

As the two sides continue to exchange charged rhetoric, both accuse the other of not wanting to actually resolve the contract talks.

“This could be settled next week if they were willing to negotiate the contract,” Sculley said. “It’s not that complicated. We have nine proposals on the table.”

Helle said he believes the city doesn’t want to agree to a new contract because of an ongoing lawsuit over whether a 10-year evergreen clause — which maintains the expired contracts’ status quo, save wage increases — is valid under the Texas Constitution. The city has asked the courts to rule on the matter, and years of litigation could be in store.

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