

Police union offers the city a new deal



Photo: Robin Jerstad /For The Express-News

Image 1 of 10

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San Antonio's cops likely won't earn a bonus this fiscal year because contract talks ahead of a July 31 deadline to agree to new terms appear to be dead.

The San Antonio Police Officers Association's negotiating team walked away from the table Friday with no plans to return for the rest of the month.

Mayor Ivy Talyor, after winning her election last month, gave the union until the end of July to agree to a new contract. Doing so would secure a lump-sum bonus for cops, ahead of a wage increase beginning Oct. 1.

But SAPOA President Mike Helle all but ruled out having a contract completed and said his team would be ready to continue negotiations next month.

City officials told the union they're prepared to negotiate any day this month, but the union's chief negotiator, Ron DeLord, is leaving on vacation, which includes attending the 75th annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in South Dakota.

Helle said his members are "acutely" aware of the situation and back the union's position.

"They know exactly what's at stake. They've all heard what is possible of being lost as far as any kind of compensation, but I will tell you that when you negotiate, anything is possible," he said.

If July 31 passes with no new contracts, the city's police officers and firefighters will forgo about \$8.5 million in bonuses the city had set aside for fiscal year 2015.

The union's proposal Friday morning — while still too expensive for the city's taste — stood as a major turning point for SAPOA's position.

Until Friday, union leaders had said the city's offer of a lump-sum payment this fiscal year, in lieu of a wage increase, was a "nonstarter." But the union's newest proposal offered a 3 percent lump-sum payment for fiscal year 2015, which ends Sept. 30.

Helle complained that the city's counterproposal was prepared Friday even before the union had made its offer, saying that indicated city officials weren't truly interested in finishing a deal. But city officials say they need to have "financial certainty" before the fiscal year 2016 budget is presented Aug. 6.

"It's important for us to know how much we need to set aside," Deputy City Manager Erik Walsh said. "If police officers and Mr. Helle see (the July 31 deadline) as a threat, it's really just reality."

Walsh said the most recent proposal fails to "strike a balance" with health care costs and wages to keep overall public-safety spending under a City Council-mandated 66 percent of the roughly \$1 billion general fund.

In a news release late Friday, the police union said its proposal keeps public-safety spending at 66 percent of the general fund and provided a spreadsheet showing estimated costs.

That spreadsheet, which calculates total public-safety spending as a percentage of the general fund, does not include the costs of an eventual contract with the firefighters union, meaning its calculations would work only if there were no new firefighters added or new salary increases for the existing firefighters over the next four fiscal years.

Nonetheless, Helle said in interviews and in a prepared statement that the union and city are close to sealing a deal.

“We are optimistic that if we stick to talking we can find a deal. We are close. I want to remind the community that there is no July 31st deadline,” Helle said in the statement. “I appreciate the mayor trying to force a deal, but we will not be held to self-imposed deadlines. Our proposal today keeps our officers from taking a pay cut, keeps our contract at 30.5 percent of the general fund, and ensures we do our part to keep public safety at no more than 66 percent of the general fund.”

Even as the city and the cops inch closer to a contract, the firefighters union remains at bay. It’s likely, experts say, that the firefighters won’t begin their negotiations until after their brothers in blue sign a new contract first.

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