

# Mayor in strong position against union



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

From left, City of San Antonio Deputy city Manager Erik Walsh, Mayor Ivy Taylor and City Manager Sheryl Sculley speak to the San Antonio Express-News Editorial Board on the city's negotiations with the San Antonio Police unions, Tuesday, July 21, 2015.

Months before Mayor Ivy Taylor announced she would run in May, a moment came when she outshone the top contenders at the time. In the process, she revealed a political temperament that's perfectly suited now to tangle with an intransigent police union.

It was December, and Alamo Beer Co. owner Eugene Simor was attempting to celebrate a soft opening for his East Side brewery with hundreds of guests. Less than a dozen anti-development protesters, however, were perched above the crowd on the Hays Street Bridge and doing their best to ruin the occasion.

At the mic, mayoral candidate Mike Villarreal tried to appease both sides, suggesting the adversaries should "sit down and have a conversation."

Leticia Van de Putte, also a candidate, simply ignored the protesters' catcalls.

When Taylor took the mic, she faced the opponents directly.

“I am actually very, very angry at the protesters right now,” the mayor said. “This is a milestone and a moment that we have looked forward to on the East Side for years — reinvestment in our neighborhoods, on this side of town, bringing jobs and new development.”

Taylor’s opinion was plain: The obstinance of the preservationists was an impediment to progress. And by fixing them publicly with such a clear-eyed stare, the mayor claimed a position of strength.

The same could be said for her approach to the San Antonio Police Officers Association.

After 18 months, the police union is content to let contract negotiations drag on despite the city’s attempts to resolve the issue before it presents a budget next month.

The union’s political capital is nearly exhausted. Its favored candidate, Van de Putte, lost the election, and City Council has unanimously directed the city to keep public-safety spending at 66 percent of the general fund.

Nonetheless, according to the city, all of SAPOA’s counter-proposals have stretched that figure past the 66 percent goal. On July 10, the union’s proposal put public-safety spending at 71.1 percent; on Friday, at 69 percent.

The union then walked away from the table indefinitely, flouting a July 31 deadline imposed by the mayor that SAPOA president Mike Helle has dismissed as “arbitrary.”

He might as well be shouting from the Hays Street Bridge.

“July 31st was not an arbitrary deadline,” Taylor said this week at a meeting with the San Antonio Express-News Editorial Board. “We do have a budget to prepare.”

Absent a deal, the city will forge ahead with a fiscal year 2016 budget based on its March 20 proposal to SAPOA, which includes an 8.8 percent wage increase and a requirement that officers pay premiums for dependents. Compared to a contract ratified this month in Austin, where firefighters agreed to a 5.5 percent pay increase and premiums for dependents, the city’s offer is more than fair.

A 10-year evergreen clause might make SAPOA feel secure enough to scoff at that. But council is set to debate whether to simply impose benefit changes as part of the budget process, an option included in the master agreement of the city’s contract with the union.

“We’ll be discussing that with the city council,” Taylor said. “I think with the length of the negotiating time at this point, that is an option that we should discuss.”

Union officials should not discount such an outcome. Like the mayor's stand at Alamo Beer, she's speaking from a position of strength — in this case, because she likely has the votes on council to employ such an option.

“There is no reason why we can't settle this,” Taylor said. “The offers that we've made have been entirely reasonable. When you look at comparison cities in Texas, our police and fire force are in a good position.

I understand it is a change from where they've been in the past, but they have to understand the context of how the healthcare marketplace has changed and what our financial constraints are as a city.”

*bchasnoff@express-news.net*