

# San Antonio Express-News

## Public safety talks going off the rails

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These days, nearly everyone has an opinion about VIA Metropolitan Transit's planned streetcar for downtown.

Even the city of San Antonio's police and firefighter associations. And, of course, that is their right.

Mired in tough negotiations with the city over health care benefits, police and firefighters have taken a strong stand against VIA's streetcar. The city is contributing \$32 million toward construction of the project. While that money is small in the scheme of things, for the public safety associations it has become symbolic of misplaced city priorities.

That money would be better spent on police cars than streetcars, San Antonio Police Officers Association President Mike Helle told the Express-News' Vienna Davila.

Meanwhile, firefighters gathered signatures to put a city charter change on the ballot to block streetcars. A charter change may be technically pointless, or so several legal opinions say. But such details don't matter. These fights over health care and the streetcar have gone beyond facts.

As costs go, though, the rich health care plans for uniformed workers will burden the city far more than its streetcar contribution. The city's contribution to VIA's streetcar is \$32 million, spread out over four years. That's it.

Since the \$280 million streetcar will run in downtown San Antonio, the city is getting nearly \$8 million from other sources for every \$1 million on it puts into the project. And the financing will be paid back over 20 years, with the first payment expected to be less than \$400,000.

Meanwhile, if the police and fire unions would agree to switch to civilian health care plans the city would save between \$15.8 million and \$23.6 million a year, officials have said. Over a four-year period, the city would realize savings between \$63 million and \$94 million.

If tea party opponents of the streetcar are genuinely concerned about government spending, they should also voice their support for reducing the cost of health care plans for police and firefighters. After all, uniform employees don't pay monthly health care premiums, a perk that is simply unheard of in today's economy.

Ongoing public safety expenses consume far too much of the general fund, squeezing out other essential services. Likewise, if the police and firefighter associations are truly concerned about the city's fiscal health, they should take a critical look at what they receive from taxpayers.

We value our first responders. We want them to have the best benefits the city can afford. But that is not an endorsement of benefits that deny other important city necessities. It doesn't justify cutting libraries and parks, or killing downtown investment.