

## Amid distrust, bargaining begins

SAN ANTONIO — How do two parties negotiate a future when neither one trusts the other?

In this case, the parties are the City of San Antonio and the San Antonio Police Officers Association.

They meet Tuesday to begin contentious negotiations over medical benefits for officers.

So little faith remains between the two, Mike Helle, president of the police union, describes City Manager Sheryl Sculley by quoting Mark Twain, who listed three kinds of lies.

That is, “lies, damn lies and statistics.

“And that’s exactly what Sheryl is doing,” Helle said on Monday. “It’s a combination of all three.”

This degree of enmity is probably what prompted Sam Dawson, CEO of Pape-Dawson Engineers, to invite me to talk with him and two others who recently served on a task force convened by Mayor Julián Castro to study the city’s public-safety costs.

The 13-member task force also included a faction of members representing police and firefighters who issued a withering “minority report” in which Sculley is accused of making “unsupported and inaccurate statements ... intended to create an atmosphere of economic hysteria.”

For clarity’s sake, the task force’s chairman, former councilman Reed Williams, told City Council that police and fire budgets are increasing at a rate that exceeds revenue growth.

According to models created by a consultant firm hired by the task force, this means that public-safety costs could outpace general fund revenues — subsuming other vital city services, such as road

maintenance and parks and recreation — at some point between 2020 and 2047.

That is, if you happen to believe anything the task force found.

“All the assumption tables are inaccurate,” Helle said. “It's all (expletive).”

And so, one begins to get a sense of the impasse, and perhaps why Dawson felt compelled to call me to his office.

“We're a little bit reluctant to say this, but I'll go ahead and say it,” he said. “Every time (the consultant) would answer a question, the minority-report group would challenge 100 percent of the data. But they never would submit any data to contradict the data. And we would ask for it.

“We'd say, 'Teach us what the real numbers are.' And we could not get that data in return.”

Buddy Morris, a health care consultant who served on the task force, offered me a bundle of numbers that he said are not only correct but also critical to the crisis.

For instance, in the private sector in San Antonio, the average monthly premium that an employee pays for health coverage is \$63; for a family, it's \$273. Civilians at the city pay an average of \$50; for a family, \$565.

By contrast, police officers and firefighters haven't had to pay any monthly medical insurance premiums for themselves, their spouses or their children since 1988.

Helle, at least, agreed with the zero figure.

“But remember, those are all negotiated items,” he said.

That's part of the problem, Dawson said.

“Health care benefits do not need to be a part of police and fire collective-bargaining agreements,” he said. “It's too dynamic of a process, and the numbers are too dynamic.”

Enter the tense negotiations. What's a city to do?

Rebecca Waldman, a retired city worker who served on the task force, noted that council members ultimately must approve the contracts negotiated between the city and the unions.

“They’re getting huge pushback, we know, from the unions to fund their campaigns, saying, ‘You’ll never be elected to another public office if you don’t support us,’” she said.

“What I’m hoping is there will be an education of the public about what the benefits are and are not,” she continued. “A lot of people have people in their families who work for the city.

“Maybe they’re civilians or they’re just taxpayers and they have their own benefits where they work, and hopefully there will be some support for the council members to stand firm.

“It all goes back to the political will to make changes.”

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