
Contract negotiations for police begin

SAN ANTONIO — The city's team charged with negotiating a new contract with the police union signaled Tuesday during opening discussions that it intends to push for several substantial changes to existing benefits for police officers, including their level of health insurance and fringe benefits, such as tuition reimbursement.

The city and the fire union, which negotiates separately, have yet to schedule an opening round of negotiations.

Labor attorney Jeff Londa, one of the chief negotiators for San Antonio, said during Tuesday's police negotiations that the city believes the current total compensation for sworn members of the Police Department is in excess of what's required under the Texas Local Government Code, which says the city must pay wages comparable to the local private sector.

Among other things, total compensation includes base pay, specialty pay, retirement and both retiree and active-duty health care.

Londa told the negotiating team for the San Antonio Police Officers Association, which includes labor attorney Craig Deats, that the city is seeking “a level of equity” between uniform and civilian employees.

Most of the city's civilian employees pay about 30 percent of the cost of their health care, while public safety personnel pay about 9 percent of their total cost and no premiums for themselves or their spouses and children.

“I don't want to hide the ball,” Londa said. “What we'll be proposing to you throughout the negotiations is that the police health plan be the same as the civilian health plan.”

SAPOA officials have said they plan to propose cost-saving measures with regard to health insurance.

Deats told city negotiators he trusts they'll be open to suggestions.

"I hope that with regard to the health insurance issue ... that the city is not going to be a one-trick pony," he said.

Labor attorney Bettye Lynn, the city's other chief negotiator, targeted a number of elements, including tuition reimbursement.

In fiscal 2013, the city spent \$363,287 on reimbursements to police officers for higher education.

"It might surprise some of you that the city is currently paying for three officers to attend law school," Lynn said.

In 2013, the city paid for officers to take classes in a number of fields beyond criminal justice, including business administration, English, art, early-childhood studies, air conditioning and heating, and counseling.

The city's team wants to complete negotiations in 60 days.

"I think it's inconceivable that the city can believe in their minds that they can actually get a deal done in 60 days," SAPOA President Mike Helle said. "That's a farce. It's not atypical for the city to lowball on their proposals, but we were hoping it would be more realistic.

"Obviously, their proposal won't be acceptable to us," he said. "But that's what the process is all about."

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<http://extras.mysanantonio.com/pdf/Ground-Rules.pdf>

<http://data.mysanantonio.com/san-antonio-top-500-city-employees-compensation/>

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