

Council Backs Task Force, City Staff on Police, Fire Negotiations

Robert Rivard on 20 March, 2014 at 05:00





Union leaders were conspicuous no-shows at City Council Wednesday afternoon as the **Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force** formally presented its findings on the growing cost of health care and pension benefits for uniformed police and fire personnel.

“Part of what we wanted to achieve today is have the task force and the union representatives make their cases,” Mayor Julián Castro said in closing remarks in council chambers. “Unfortunately, that didn’t happen because the union leaders didn’t show up today. It is clear – and I think both sides would agree – that we have to bring these costs under control.”

After weeks of union leaders targeting City Manager Sheryl Sculley in media attacks, accusing her of bullying and intimidating union leaders, Wednesday’s session was an unequivocal vote of confidence by Castro and council members to support the task force, and Sculley and staff as they enter into separate contract negotiations with the police and fire fighters. There were no votes recorded in the B Session, which are informational in nature, but every elected official who spoke pledged support for city staff and promised not to meet separately with union leaders.

“I would ask my colleagues to let these negotiations happen at the table,” Castro said. Council members seemed more than willing to let city staff handle the challenge.

The current contracts expire Sept. 30, although the unions enjoy an unusual 10-year continuation provision in the event negotiations reach an impasse. Uniformed personnel cannot strike in such an event, and city officials cannot reduce benefits. Several council members informally told me they expect a new contract will be achieved without prolonged negotiations. City staff and police union leaders are scheduled to meet April 3. The bargaining session is open to the public. No date has been set for city staff to start negotiations with fire union leaders.



*San Antonio City Manager
Sheryl Sculley*



*Samuel Dawson of
Pape-Dawson
Engineers.*

While there was no clash of opposing viewpoints Wednesday, Samuel Dawson, a task force member and principal with **Pape-Dawson Engineers**, surprised some in the audience when he began his opening presentation to council by noting that the task force was unaware that four task force members representing police and fire fighters had broken away to write its own minority report, which they did not disclose to the others. Castro had invited the faction to present its minority report at the B Session, but its members declined.

“None of us knew anything about a minority report,” Dawson said, describing the remaining nine members as the “silent majority.”

“We are here today to say there was no manipulation of the process or the data or the financials in any way,” Dawson said, before inviting other task force members to help present the report. You can review the full task force presentation [here](#). The Austin-based consultant group PFM was engaged by the city task force to compare cash compensation to San Antonio police and fire fighters with their counterparts in six other Texas cities, including Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, El Paso and Corpus Christi.

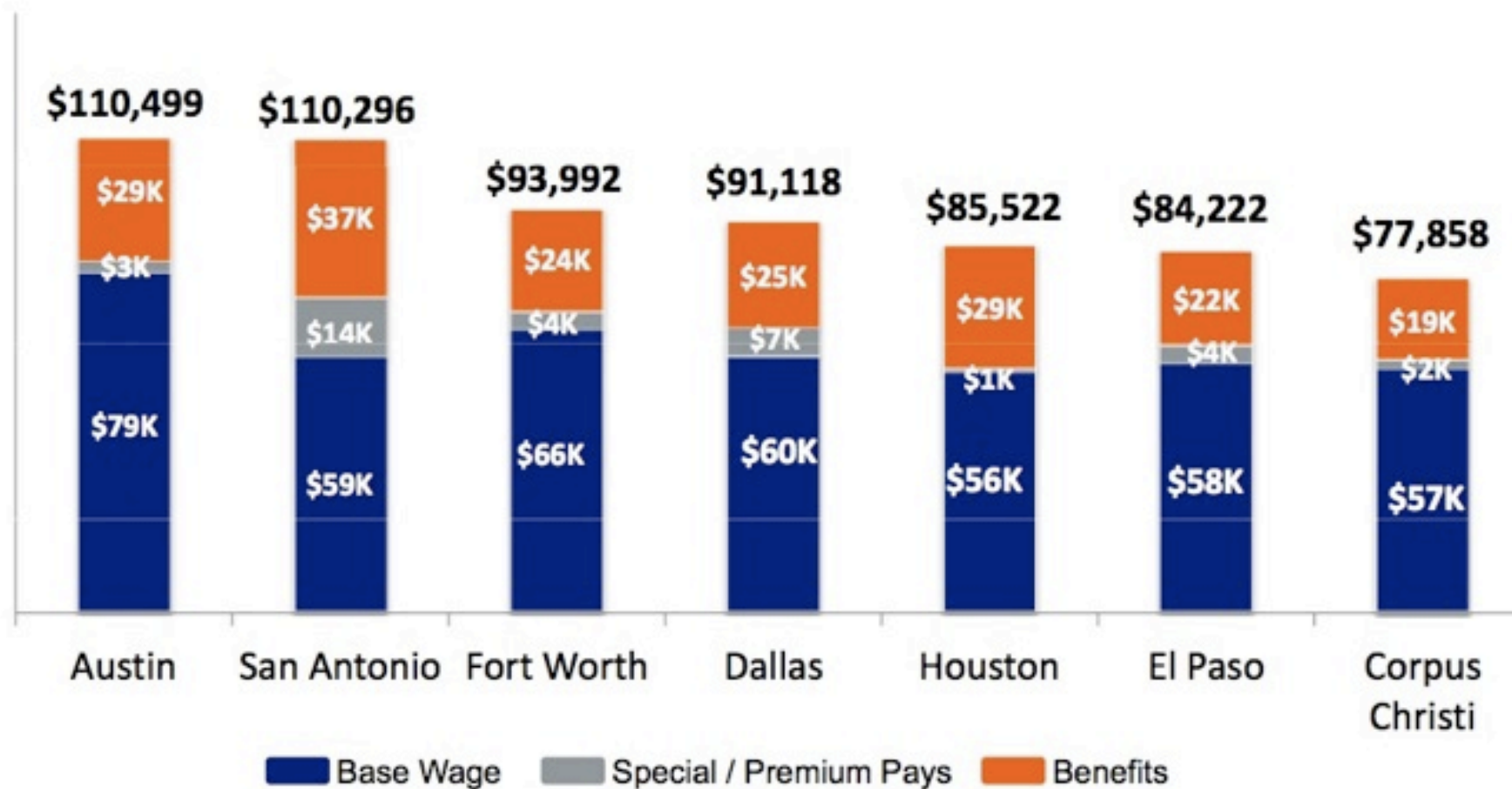
The consultants found that San Antonio offered the lowest housing costs, and workers in the city earned the lowest average salaries except for Corpus Christi. Police and fire fighters, however, earned total compensation packages that placed them among the highest in the state, with best-in-state health care and pension benefits.

Rank & File Firefighter Compensation

Twenty Years of Service (as of September 30, 2013)



Base Wage (Regionally Adjusted) + Special / Premium Pays (Regionally Adjusted) + Major Benefit Costs



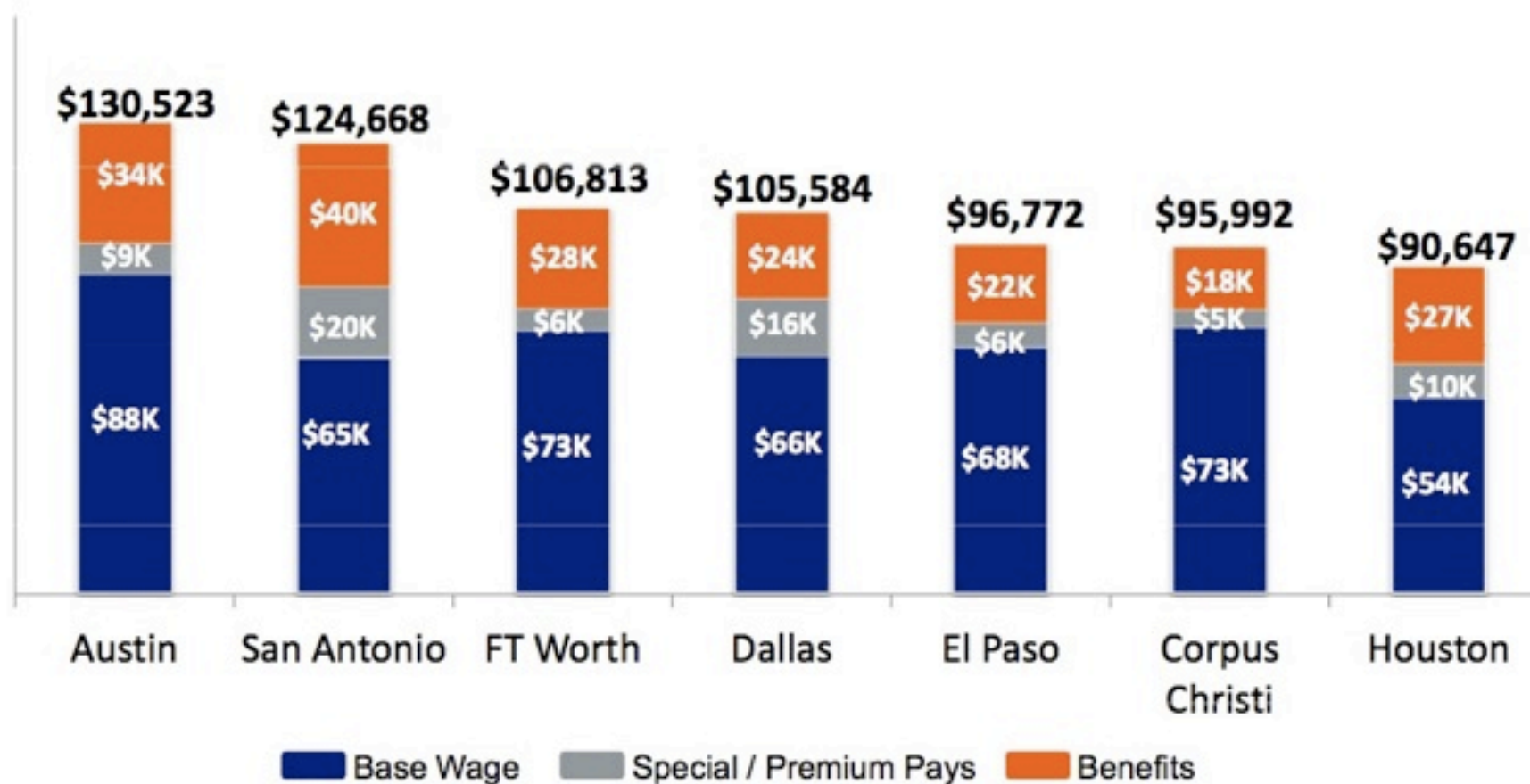
From the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force presentation to City Council on March 19, 2014.

Rank & File Police Officer Compensation

Twenty Years of Service (as of September 30, 2013)



Base Wage (Regionally Adjusted) + Special / Premium Pays (Regionally Adjusted) + Major Benefit Costs



From the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force presentation to City Council on March 19, 2014.

Several council members who had reviewed the minority report said they did have questions based on concerns raised by union officials, but no one expressed support for the overall report. **District 2 Councilwoman Ivy Taylor** was critical of the work.

“Like my fellow council members, I am disappointed the minority did not come today,” Taylor said, who described the minority report as “disorganized. It doesn’t speak directly to the concerns. I think the union leaders are doing a disservice to the rank and file by not being here.”

Taylor also expressed disappointment after hearing from an intern in her office who told her about a recent “ride along” with San Antonio police that included her attendance at a roll call session in which the ranking lieutenant veered from official business to warn officers, “Sculley is trying to steal our benefits.”



District 2 Councilwoman Ivy Taylor

San Antonio spends twice as much on benefits for its uniformed personnel as it spends on civilian workers, while all other peer cities give uniformed personnel and civilian workers the same benefits packages. The city also spends a significantly higher percentage of its budget on public safety than any other major Texas city.

After several years of annual warnings that such spending threatened the city’s AAA bond rating and its ability to fund other basic services, such as parks and libraries, City Manager Sheryl Sculley received unanimous backing Wednesday from Mayor Julián Castro and council members to negotiate new police and fire contracts this year.

“It might not be the most exciting thing happening in our city, but it’s about the most important thing,” said District 4 Councilman Rey Saldaña. “Our police and fire fighters are compensated very well, perhaps too richly going forward into the future.”

District 8 Councilman Ron Nirenberg agreed: “The AAA bond rating is the key measure of the fiscal health of the city...let’s put away the rhetoric and talk about comparables vis-a-viz other cities and their uniformed and civilian employees. We have some pretty stark choices, so let the negotiators negotiate. I have full confidence in the city staff.”

POLICE, FIRE DEATH BENEFITS OFF THE TABLE

A story broadcast by KENS-TV last month erroneously inferred that cuts in death benefits were under consideration for surviving family members of SAPD officers who died in the line of duty. A KENS reporter spoke with numerous widows of slain police officers, but the uncorrected story never acknowledged that no one on city staff or the task force had proposed reducing those benefits. The misleading story is still on the KENS website [here](#).

That led **District 9 City Councilman Joe Krier** to seek clarification at the Wednesday session. City staff confirmed death benefits cuts were never on the table.

For the record, the surviving spouse of a uniformed police officer or fire fighter killed in the line of duty receives these benefits:

- 100% salary as pension as long as the spouse is alive, even if he or she remarries
- a lump sum from the federal government of \$328,000
- a lump sum from the state of Texas for \$250,000
- a lump sum life insurance benefit from the City of San Antonio equal to two years’ salary
- worker’s compensation payments up to \$850 per week
- full health care benefits coverage for spouse and all surviving dependents
- free college tuition, including room, board, and fees, for all dependents who attend a state college or university

“Of course, there is no putting a price on the life of our police and fire fighters,” Krier noted after staff summarized the death benefits package which will carry over into the next contracts.

*Featured/top image: City of San Antonio’s Public Safety Headquarters
at 315 South San Rosa St.

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