

## Council rips fire, police unions for missing meeting



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*Councilman Ron Nirenberg Walks by police and firefighters union members gathered in force as city council prepares to hear the recommendations of a task force considering their retirement and health benefits on Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2014.*

**By Josh Baugh**

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SAN ANTONIO — It was what they didn't say that irked City Council members Wednesday.

Fire and police union officials were rebuked for not presenting their minority report challenging the findings of a task force that concluded, among other things, that health care benefits for uniform

personnel are “richer by a large margin” than those of their peers in Texas' other largest cities.

Several council members voiced frustration with [REDACTED] the missed opportunity to have a public discussion with union officials regarding their concerns that the task force's findings were inaccurate.

The task force had concluded that City Manager Sheryl Sculley's prediction that the public safety budget would overrun the general fund was accurate.

That's one item on a long list of contentions the unions have with the task force's conclusions.

Councilman Rey Saldaña said there's an argument that San Antonio won't be able to afford high levels of compensation for public safety personnel.

“And there's some debate about that because there's a disagreement about the genuineness of numbers,” he said. “That's why I'm severely disappointed that we weren't able to hear from the minority members of the task force that put out a report.”

Mike Helle, president of the San Antonio Police Officers Association, said the four authors of the minority report decided against presenting their findings to the council. They had wanted to make a presentation on the same day, Feb. 19, that former Councilman Reed Williams, chairman of the task force, presented the 13-member group's findings to the council.

But Helle said the unions are open to a presentation to the council.

“If the mayor wants the unions to follow up and give a presentation on what our thoughts are on the process, we have no problem doing that at all,” he said.

For more than an hour Wednesday, members of the task force's majority offered a detailed presentation of data they analyzed. They say public safety personnel here have benefits that drastically outpace those of both the private and public sector around Texas.

“We call ourselves, maybe, the silent majority, if you will, to make sure that the hard work and effort that went into our report is not discredited in any way,” Pape-Dawson Engineers CEO Sam Dawson, a task force member, told the council.

After the presentations, council members addressed the mostly empty chambers. Councilman Diego Bernal, who defeated a retired firefighter when he initially ran for office, said he grew up with many people who became public-safety workers in San Antonio.

And there's a general desire, he said, to ensure that such workers are well-compensated.

“That's why I'm so bothered that folks didn't show up to make the pitch, to make the case,” he said.

“The minority report was given to us as we walked in the door a few weeks ago, and there was a plea at that point to call on someone so they could make the case. And of course, that was when the room was packed with folks.”

Bernal said the minority report authors were given two dates to come and present to the council and that both were declined. He chastised the unions for letting down their members by not presenting their points Wednesday.

In the midst of his speech, a member of the firefighter's union, who had been monitoring the meeting, stood up, shook his head and left the chambers.

Other council members continued, echoing the same sentiment. That shared frustration created a unity on the dais that's been an uncommon sight in council chambers for years.

The current council has continually said it wants to ensure that the city's uniform personnel are well-compensated while guaranteeing San Antonio's financial security into the future. There's no desire to kick the issue down the road for another council to deal with some years from now.

There's a consistent theme in their statements, and those from Sculley, that they respect the work of police officers and firefighters. They say they recognize the superior caliber of the departments.

Helle, the union boss, said such quality doesn't happen by mistake.

San Antonio must offer strong benefits and compensation in order to attract — and keep — high-quality people.

“It's important that we have good benefits so that you have employees that will work for 25 or 30 years,” he said. “It has been disastrous for cities previously who did not have good benefits or legitimate pensions.”

Helle pointed to “nomadic” police officers in California who jump between cities every three or four years to obtain better salaries and benefits.

The benefits that San Antonio's firefighters and police officers have — such as no premiums on health insurance and minuscule deductibles and low maximum out-of-pocket expenses — are recruiting tools, and they've been slowly and methodically earned over decades through negotiations, Helle said.

Now, Sculley wants to “rip them out of their hands,” he said.

Whether that will happen remains to be seen. The police union met with the city's negotiating team for the opening of collective bargaining this week. The fire union has yet to schedule its first meeting.

The city's negotiators said they want negotiated contracts completed within 60 days. Helle's team immediately balked, saying there's little chance that would happen, given the level of cuts the city has already proposed — including putting police and fire onto the same health care plans as civilians, who pay about 30 percent of the cost.

The council signaled Wednesday that the days of its input and discussion about the matter are over. The talks now need to be at the negotiating table. That resonates with Helle.

“All this rhetoric and noise that has been put out should have been handled at the negotiation table,” he said.

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