

# Union's Name Calling Can't Obscure the Numbers

**Robert Rivard** on 19 March, 2014 at 05:00





Police and fire union officials know that name calling beats number crunching every time, and some in the local media have eagerly taken the bait, letting emotion trump fact in the attack campaign that has targeted **City Manager Sheryl Sculley** in recent weeks.

Some readers turned off by negative politics might ask why they should care. The answer, I'd suggest, is that the city's long-term financial health hangs in the balance. Sculley's willingness to ask elected officials and taxpayers to face the music now rather than kick the issue down the road has exposed her to some intense and unfortunate mud-slinging that plays poorly locally and will play even worse outside the city.

The sideshow takes a back seat today, however, to the sober reality of financial statements and projections when the **Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force** formally presents its findings to City Council. You can review those findings [here](#). The task force has been meeting since last October in anticipation of expiring police and fire fighter labor contracts and Sculley's much-discussed warnings that current health care benefits and pension contributions are unsustainable.



San Antonio City Manager Sheryl Sculley

"Sheryl has been talking about this problem for at least five budget cycles," said one city official. "She always shows Council a slide showing pension and health care costs growing."

The cost of health care for police and fire fighters has risen by 140% from 2003-13, city official say, although that number includes the addition of 477 new police officers and fire fighters over that time period.

## Police – All Ranks

*Average Cash Compensation (FY 2013)*



- The table below details the components average police officer pay, as well as average pay for all ranks within the bargaining unit above probationary police officer, for FY 2013

|                                               | Police Officer  | All Ranks       |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Base Pay                                      | \$59,404        | \$64,368        |
| Longevity                                     | \$3,394         | \$4,964         |
| Overtime                                      | \$3,184         | \$3,716         |
| Shift Differential                            | \$2,945         | \$2,560         |
| Leave Buy-back                                | \$2,138         | \$2,931         |
| Police Certification Pay                      | \$1,853         | \$2,179         |
| Education Incentive Pay                       | \$1,583         | \$1,897         |
| Clothing Allowance                            | \$1,190         | \$1,191         |
| Premium Pay                                   | \$1,117         | \$1,185         |
| Court Time/Overtime                           | \$860           | \$832           |
| Other Compensation                            | \$1,841         | \$1,838         |
| <b>Average Cash Compensation per Employee</b> | <b>\$79,509</b> | <b>\$87,662</b> |

Analysis includes all bargaining unit members above rank of "Police Officer – Probationary." Table summarizes actual pay received between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013. Data provided by City of San Antonio; analyzed by PFM.

From the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force report.

# Fire – All Ranks

## Average Cash Compensation (FY 2013)



- The table below summarizes average firefighter pay, as well as average pay for all ranks within the bargaining unit above probationary firefighter, for FY 2013
- Overtime figures include "scheduled overtime" to conform with the Federal Labor Standards Act

|                                               | Firefighter     | All Ranks       |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Base Pay                                      | \$57,284        | \$64,286        |
| Overtime                                      | \$10,561        | \$14,843        |
| Longevity                                     | \$2,411         | \$4,908         |
| EMT/Paramedic Certification                   | \$1,503         | \$2,383         |
| Bonus Leave Buy-back*                         | \$1,354         | \$1,391         |
| Vacation Buy-back                             | \$1,467         | \$1,640         |
| Education Incentive Pay                       | \$1,167         | \$1,387         |
| High Class Pay                                | \$1,145         | \$943           |
| Fire Certification Pay                        | \$926           | \$1,190         |
| Premium Pay                                   | \$627           | \$581           |
| Other Compensation                            | \$1,846         | \$2,487         |
| <b>Average Cash Compensation per Employee</b> | <b>\$80,292</b> | <b>\$96,040</b> |

Analysis includes all bargaining unit members above rank of "Firefighter-Probationary." Table summarizes actual pay received between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013. Data provided by City of San Antonio; analyzed by PFM.

\* - SAFD reports that FY 2013 represented abnormally high use of bonus leave buy-back because of changes in the collective bargaining agreement that encouraged a spike in payouts. About 90% of rank-and-file firefighters received bonus leave payouts in FY 2013.

From the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force report.

As negotiations get underway between the two sides later this month, it's those health care benefits that are on the table. Sculley's call to also renegotiate the city's obligatory pre-paid retirement health care for uniformed personnel, and the city's annual contributions to the pension funds first will require action by the Texas Legislature. Each major city seems to have its own enabling legislation for such contracts, so when San Antonio city officials seek relief, they won't need to deal with other cities and their uniformed personnel contracts, but it will still be a major undertaking.

Sculley is not the problem here. Union officials say she can't be trusted to provide elected officials with honest numbers. They call her a bully, an intimidating force and worse. They claim she threatened a local public relations and marketing firm to cancel its pension fund contract with the [Fire and Police Pension Fund](#) and its board, a charge the agency owner publicly refuted though it didn't win any headlines.

San Antonio didn't get its [AAA bond rating](#) in New York by Sculley cooking the city's books. On the contrary, her sound fiscal management over the years has brought stability and transparency to the city budget and a new level of outside confidence in San Antonio's municipal leadership.

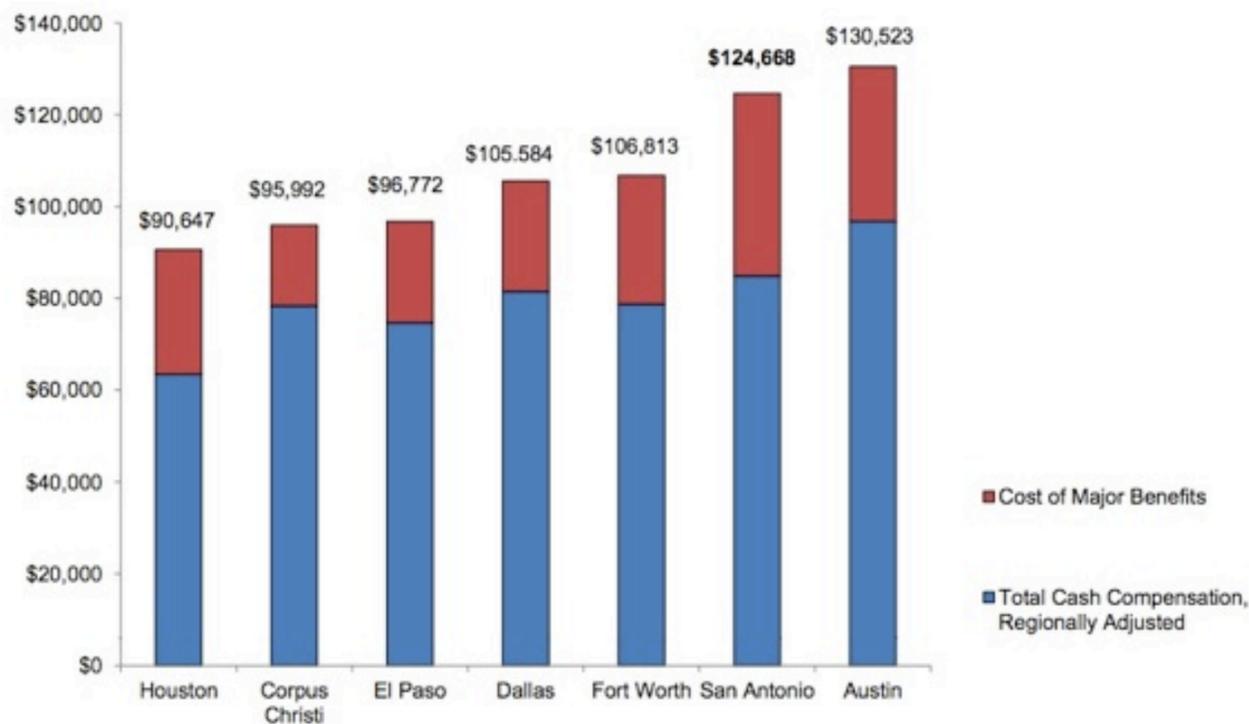
The problem isn't a person, it's the 1988 contract won by each of the unions that set the city on a course requiring it to spend more and more of the general budget on public safety and uniformed personnel with each passing year. Currently, public safety accounts for 65% of the city budget, unmatched in any other Texas city.

# Rank & File Police Officer Compensation

Twenty Years of Service



Total Cash Compensation (Regionally Adjusted) + Major Benefit Costs



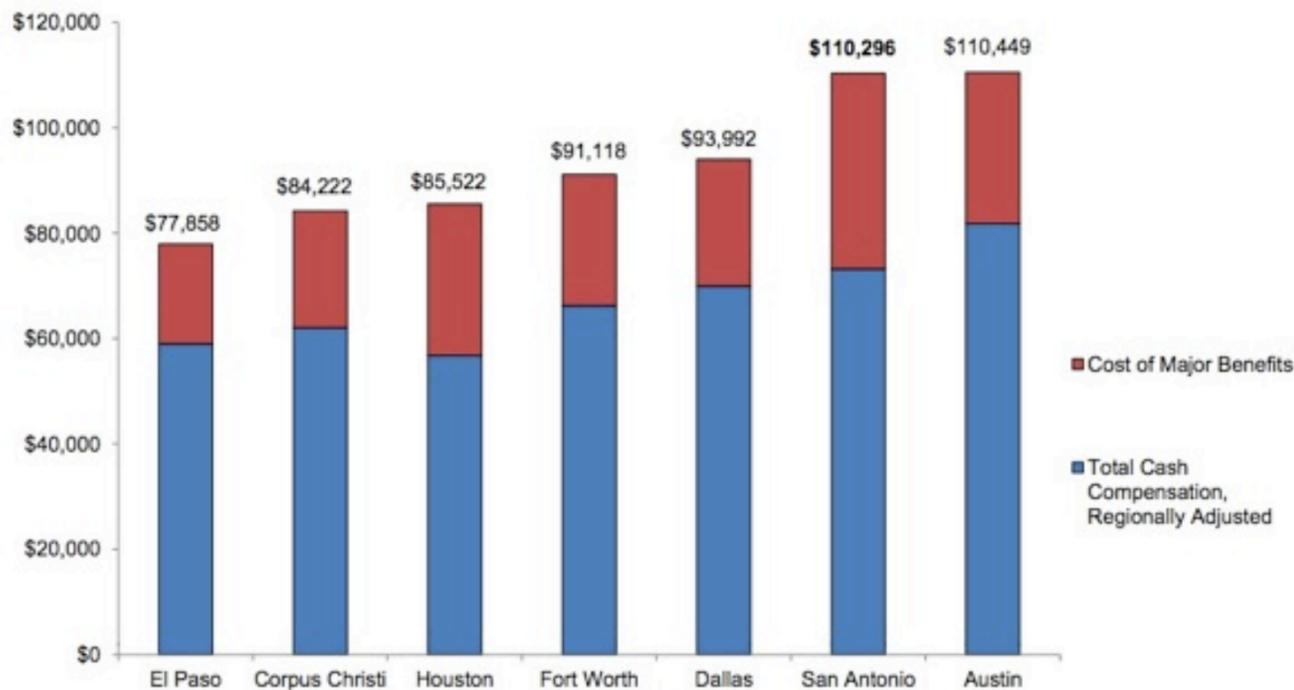
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# Rank & File Firefighter Compensation

Twenty Years of Service



Total Cash Compensation (Regionally Adjusted) + Major Benefit Costs



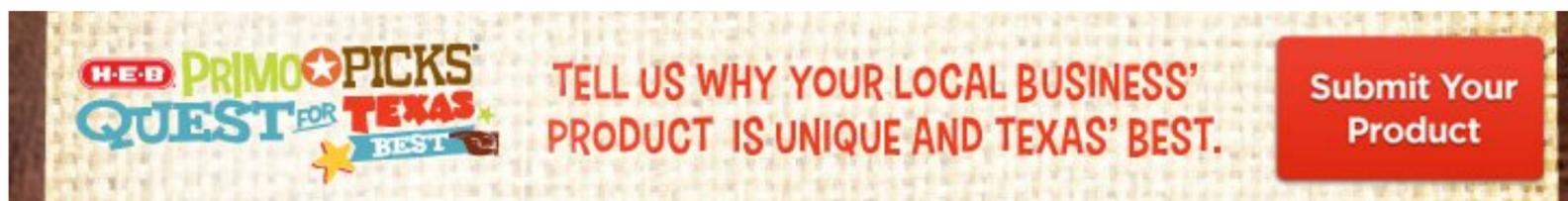
From the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force report.

It was a poorly negotiated contract, and city officials today are paying the price for the failure of their predecessors to do a better job of managing taxpayer money and anticipating the long-term costs in a growing Sun Belt city. Mayor Henry Cisneros and City Manager Lou Fox accomplished many things in their day, but this was not their finest hour.

The 1988 contract led to two indefensible inequities for city employees. One, it gave the police and fire fighters a health care package that requires them to pay zero in the way of monthly premiums. No one pays zero, anywhere.

Look at it this way if you happen to be married and you and your spouse both have health care plans with your respective employers: Do you and your spouse weigh which plan is best for your family? Police and fire fighters never have that conversation

with their spouses. Why should they? Their plans require zero contribution, and no spouse can beat that.



Second, the contract requires the thousands of civilian employees working for the city to accept second class status. For decades now, they have received a separate health care plan and pension benefit that pales beside the one received by the police and fire fighters. What about equity?

## Rank & File Police Officer Compensation



- San Antonio police officers rank **2 of 7** among the Texas cities for total cash compensation at the beginning of a career, and at 20 years of service (when an officer is eligible for normal retirement) when adjusted for regional labor market differences
- In addition, San Antonio contributes more toward both pension and healthcare benefits than any of the comparison cities

*From the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force report.*

## Rank & File Firefighter Compensation



- San Antonio firefighters rank **1 of 7** among the Texas cities for total cash compensation at the beginning of a career, and **2 of 7** at 20 YOS (when an officer is eligible for normal retirement), when adjusted for regional labor market differences
- In addition, San Antonio contributes among the highest amounts toward both pension and healthcare benefits. At 20 YOS, San Antonio trails Austin for the top ranking by \$203 (0.2%)

*From the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force report.*

Sculley and other city officials have been painted into a corner by a long-forgotten contract negotiation that has forced budget officers each year to allocate a higher and higher percentage of the city budget to public safety, resulting in less money for all other city services.

Sculley has said the bubble will burst some years from now, probably around 2030. She could be off by a few years, but does it matter? Give her credit for looking out over the horizon now and her willingness to tell Mayor Julián Castro, the council members and all of us who pay taxes the bad news we don't necessarily want to hear. No one wants to be on the wrong side of police and fire fighters. Nor do they have the right to abuse that public trust and feed without limits at the public trough.

Now comes the presentation today at the City Council B Session. Unfortunately, it's probably going to get ugly. The unions are girding for a fight, as the mud-slinging has already shown, and their leadership has no intention of giving anything back hard-won in collective bargaining negotiations decades ago.

Castro has invited the union representatives and their consultant on the task force to present a minority report at today's council meeting. Task force members have declined the offer, blaming Sculley's intimidating tactics. Those seem to be in the eye of the beholder. A more realistic assessment suggests the unions want to avoid a debate on the merits of the numbers which do not favor their members. The simple fact is San Antonio's uniformed personnel are compensated as well or better than their counterparts in other major Texas cities.

Today's afternoon council B session is the opening act in an unusual and unpleasant showdown to contemplate: In a right to work state, in a city that has enjoyed good police and fire-civilian relations for many years, the two alternatives are a new, more real-world contract or a city hall-union showdown that could reverberate in local politics for years to come. It's a moment when strong, sensible leadership at city hall is more important than ever.

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**Robert Rivard**

Robert Rivard is director of the Rivard Report.

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