

A New Union Contract: How Castro Exits Strong

Robert Rivard on 19 May, 2014 at 12:51





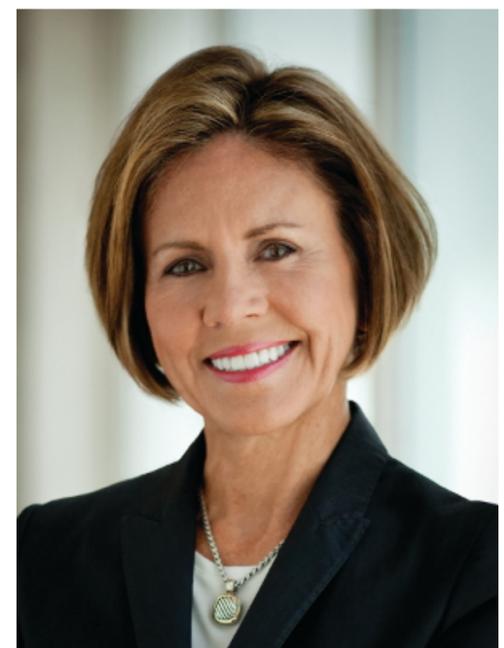
If Mayor Julián Castro wants to give the city of San Antonio one last gift and achieve one more significant accomplishment before departing for Washington and a new job as [Secretary of Housing and Urban Development](#), he should do whatever it takes to help [City Manager Sheryl Sculley](#) win a new collective bargaining agreement with police and firefighters.

That means a deal by the end of July when the U.S. Congress goes into summer recess for the month of August. I am presuming here that [President Barack Obama](#) will nominate Castro to become the next HUD secretary and that the Democratic-controlled Senate will agree to expedited confirmation hearings. The [Senate Banking Committee](#) presumably could start and finish the hearings in the space of one week. Republicans will start to take aim at Castro as a future vice presidential hopeful, but they'll find little material to work with.

Mayor Julián Castro could become Secretary Castro less than two years after he delivered the Sept. 4, 2012 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte. San Antonio could be operating with an interim and weaker mayor by Aug. 1.

Both sides agreed in March to complete a new contract by the end of June. That is no longer a realistic date with the next bargaining session set for mid-June, but a mid-July date – while ambitious – is possible if both sides give ground, which is the nature of a good negotiation. There are several compelling reasons for Castro to push with Sculley for such an agreement:

- On the current track, negotiations with the police union are probably headed for impasse while the firefighters sit on the sidelines as interested observers and await their turn. An expedited agreement serves both management and the union, and the city at large. San Antonio doesn't need to become a city where we lose the long peace between uniformed officers and civilian bosses.
- Without an agreement this summer, the unions will weigh in, full force, on the City Council scramble to elect an interim mayor who will serve out the last year of Castro's unexpired term and presumably gain the advantage of incumbency in the May 2015 city election. The process will be convoluted enough without the unions becoming a factor.
- Castro might disappoint many in San Antonio with his decision to go to Washington now, three years before his term limits run out in 2017, but none can deny his record of accomplishment over the last four years. Adding a new, more balanced collective bargaining agreement to that record means he won't have to sit in Washington reading about labor strife in his hometown, or suffer critics who say he left his post at a key moment.
- Sculley will never be stronger than now with Castro behind her. She deserves enormous credit for taking on an issue that others before her ignored and that has now existed for 25 years. Sculley and her team of negotiators probably know they can't get everything they want in one bargaining year. A quarter century of entitlement can't be reversed in a single contract.



San Antonio City Manager

Sheryl Sculley

What would a sensible compromise look like? It has to start with the police union and its negotiators continuing to acknowledge that Sculley has been right all along: the current rich array of health care benefits and special pay perks paid to the unions and unmatched in other cities cannot be sustained. The unions have to give back and join the rest of world in paying for part of their own health care costs, surrendering some perks, and accepting equal footing with civilian employees.

For starters, police can agree the so-called legal fund which pays personal legal expenses for union members – be they arrested for a DWI or divorcing their spouse or ordering up a last will and testament – needs to be eliminated. It's a multi-million dollar slush

fund.

Second, police can agree to start paying monthly health care premiums for themselves, their spouses and their children. They can adhere to policies that encourage users to stay in-network with physicians choices, avoid emergency room care for non-emergency services, and when appropriate, use the benefits offered spouses at their workplaces to reduce the city's current burden of paying virtually all insurance costs.

All of this can be accomplished by merging the police and civilians into one new plan that addresses any legitimate concerns of the union and delivers the budget savings that are essential to good fiscal management. There can't be a deal unless the city can reduce the percentage of the general fund being spent on uniformed personnel.



Ron Delord, representing the SAPD Union, sits at the head of the conference table to the left of Houston lawyer Jeff Londa, who is representing the City of San Antonio with Fort Worth attorney Bettye Lynn (far right) during contract negotiations on April 29, 2014. Photo by Robert Rivard.

One approach would be to give the unions three to five years to gradually move from their present benefits program to equity with civilian employees. This could be done by merging into one plan now with the city subsidizing premiums on a graduated basis for a number of years. Union members could pay 25% of the new costs the first year, 50% the second year, and so on. By the end of the new contract, they and civilians could be treated equally.

The police will want a pay raise in the new five-year contract. That should be contingent on their benefits give-backs. The faster they come into the civilian plan, the more they improve the numbers and make a pay raise affordable.

That might not be the contract Sculley and team wish to achieve, and it's certainly not the contract the unions wish for, but it's a realistic compromise. The public overwhelmingly supports the city leadership in this negotiation, and the police union would be smart to proactively work toward a compromise. The firefighters union would be wise to do as they've done in the past and sign on the same dotted line as the police.

San Antonio would still be very competitive with other Texas cities in terms of police and firefighter pay. The City could then turn to

other pressing issues as an interim mayor and realigned City Council work to maintain the tremendous momentum built over the decade that former Mayor Phil Hardberger and then Mayor Castro together built and sustained. That's the long-term challenge, and it won't be easy.

**Featured/top image: (File photo) Mayor Julián Castro delivers remarks at the JFK memorial ceremony at Brooks City-Base in November 2013. Photo by Annette Crawford.*