

## ANOTHER VIEW

# Balance public safety costs, other needs



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As the CEO of an insurance and financial services company, the recent debate over fire and police health care costs caught my attention.

My company employs almost 2,000 people, and like many other businesses, we work hard to provide affordable health care to our employees. In recent years that has become more and more difficult, and certainly more costly. That is why we should all pay attention to the negotiations taking place at City Hall.

Last year, City Manager Sheryl Sculley alerted the San Antonio City Council to a significant, structural problem with the city's budget. On our current path, 100 percent of the city budget will ultimately be consumed by public safety expenses. The City Council responded, and a task force was appointed to study the issue.

The 13-member Health Care and Retirement Benefits Task Force studied the issue of pension and health care for uniformed personnel. Seeing other cities across the country go into massive debt or, worse, go bankrupt over unsustainable contracts, I supported this proactive effort to ensure San Antonio does not suffer a similar fate.

The city's task force found the current level of spending on fire and police health care costs unsustainable. If unchecked, public safety expenses will gradually crowd out expenditures for parks, libraries, streets, drainage and waste collection. Obviously, that's unacceptable.

In response to the task force's findings, the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce commissioned a survey to measure the opinion of the general public on this issue. After citizens were made aware that police officers and firefighters pay no monthly premium for health care coverage for themselves or their dependents, almost two-thirds of those surveyed supported a change.

As health care costs have increased in recent years, almost all employees, regardless of where they work, have been asked to absorb a larger portion of the costs. It should be no different for firefighters and police officers.

We all have a responsibility to look beyond our personal and political interests to find a balanced approach to public safety and quality of life that is in the best interest of the community. I urge the fire and police unions to bargain in good faith with the city manager, and for the City Council to support a reasonable solution to unsustainable public safety expenses.

San Antonio is too great a city to turn out like Detroit. In times of challenge we have always pulled together as a community to solve our problems, and I expect this time to be no different. We all support and appreciate our men and women in uniform, but we also recognize that for San Antonio to succeed we must maintain a financially healthy city government and strike the appropriate balance between public safety and other municipal services.