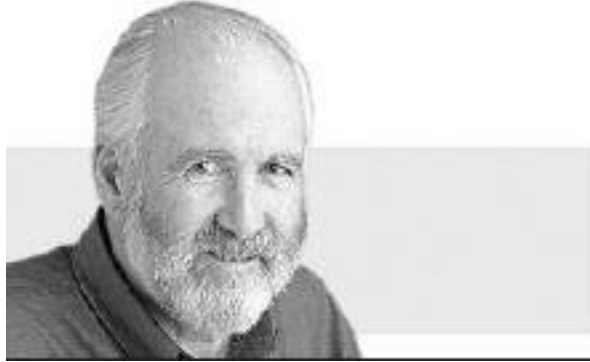


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Police, fire unions contract talks déjà vu all over again

RICK CASEY



I'd like to begin this piece by once again thanking Ronnie Crocker, an excellent copy editor at the Houston Chronicle. Some years ago, I wrote a column about how the Houston police union was in serious, if tough, negotiations with the city while the firefighters' union was posturing and making outrageous demands.

My lead began, "There's an old Texas saying that pigs get fat and hogs get slaughtered."

Ronnie called me over to his desk and said, "Rick, you're writing about the police union. Do you really want to use a metaphor about pigs?"

The answer was, of course, no I didn't.

The memory recently came to mind for obvious reasons. San Antonio's police and firefighter contracts are up for renewal, and the dynamic appears to be the same in San Antonio as it was in Houston.

After months of fits and starts and angry charges against the city manager, the police union is now engaged in serious negotiations. Sources say the bargaining will be tough, but progress is being made.

Meanwhile the firefighters' union has continued to throw bombs. It ran a retired firefighter against Councilman Diego Bernal after Bernal backed the city manager's efforts to rein in the rampant costs of health benefits for current and retired officers. Bernal easily won re-election, but the threat against other council members hangs in the air.

The fire union also was a major force in collecting signatures to put the controversial streetcar proposal to a vote. Mayor Ivy Taylor pulled the issue out of the fire by getting County Judge Nelson Wolff to join her in canceling the streetcar project.

And the firefighters still haven't come to the table to negotiate.

While their leaders may think they will do better than the police union, the practical reality is the best they can hope for is another "me too" contract.

That's exactly how they got the rich medical benefits in the current contract, and the retirement health insurance that costs them virtually nothing, despite the fact that they can retire in their 40s after 20 years of service.

That benefit was won by the police union and its powerful president, Sgt. Harold Flammia, in the controversial contract of 1988. Flammia and his union were so politically powerful that then-Mayor Henry Cisneros wanted their backing for his proposed Alamodome.

They were so powerful that when Flammia got annoyed during negotiations with a budget office staffer whose job it was to determine the costs of various proposals, she was ordered not to attend any more negotiating sessions.

And the contract was so rich that Flammia went to federal prison for taking a half million dollars in kickbacks from a fund it set up to provide personal legal insurance to uniformed employees.

City Council has been trying to get the skyrocketing medical benefits under control in contract negotiations ever since, but nobody has pushed the cause as effectively as City Manager Sheryl Sculley.

Only one councilman, Cris Medina, has openly resisted her efforts and sided with the police and fire unions. It's more than a little ironic that he is the only council member known to be under investigation by local and federal authorities regarding allegations of public corruption.

There is, however, a historical precedent. Back in 2003, City Council was about to approve a new police union contract with a generous 19 percent raise over four years when union leaders filed a class-action lawsuit claiming millions in back overtime pay from the city.

Having learned of the suit, the council voted 8-3 against ratifying the contract. Two of the three in the minority were under indictment and would later be convicted of corruption. The third was the widow of a police officer.

This column first appeared as the "Last Word" on KLRN's "Texas Week with Rick Casey." The program appears Friday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 1 p.m.

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