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Council candidates consider public safety negotiations

Economy, salaries raise questions for some.

By [Katie Humphrey](#)

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On this, the candidates agree: No one wants to compromise public safety.

But how much the cost of that public safety affects the city budget will be a question the winners of the May 10 City Council election will have to grapple with in the coming year.

Unions for all the public safety agencies, including the police and fire departments and Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services, are negotiating contracts this year. That means the city's public safety expenses — this year they consume 65 percent of the \$592 million general fund — are a moving target.

Some candidates say it's premature to specify cost expectations without seeing a budget forecast. Others say an agreement that guaranteed higher raises for public safety employees must be scrapped. And other trade-offs, such as other departments that might suffer cuts at the expense of public safety, need to be considered, candidates say.

Unions representing police, fire and emergency medical services workers endorsed their choices in January, almost two months before the filing deadline for candidates. It was the first time all three groups picked a single slate of candidates: Lee Leffingwell in Place 1, Randi Shade in Place 3 and Cid Galindo in Place 4.

The groups have been influential in past local elections. Their political action committees have more than \$66,000 that could be used in the May races, as long as the money is not in direct coordination with the campaigns.

"We don't expect a yes person who sits up there to agree with us on every single issue," said Wuthipong Tantaksinanukij, chairman of the Austin Police Association PAC. "What we do expect is that if something affects us, that you give us a chance to voice our concerns and hear us out."

Meet-and-confer negotiations with the Austin Police Association, open to the public for the first time, started April 3. Negotiations with firefighters and emergency medical services workers will begin soon. A fourth set of negotiations with representatives for marshals and parks and airport police could also happen, unless an agreement is reached during Austin Police Association negotiations to bring those agencies into the Police Department.

Council members are not directly involved with the negotiations but do have to approve the final contract. They are briefed about legal issues along the way, said Assistant City Manager Michael McDonald.

Previous negotiations with the police and fire unions have been contentious and lengthy, punctuated by impasses. This is the first time emergency medical services workers have had negotiating rights. The city's goal is to negotiate all the contracts by the end of September.

City officials who criticize public safety spending have noted that salaries are the driving force behind rising public safety. The 2004 police contract included a public safety premium that guaranteed a 2 percent raise in addition to what was offered citywide.

According to a 2005 analysis, wages for workers without bargaining rights trailed those for public safety workers who had those rights for the past decade. For example, a police officer's salary, when adjusted for inflation, grew 91 percent while a comparable nonsafety employee saw an 8 percent increase.

Both Place 3 incumbent Jennifer Kim and challenger Shade have raised concerns about how the economy, particularly sales tax revenues that so far have not met projections, would affect the negotiations and salaries.

"While public safety is very important, I think we must be very careful about making any funding commitments until we know what our budget will look like," Kim said, adding that the public safety premium for police will have to be discussed.

Shade also said the raises would have to be looked at. She said the public safety premium looks like an "untenable position to take" given the economic outlook.

"It's important that we obviously manage costs, that we have good, safe, open communication," Shade said.

Ken Weiss is also running for Place 3.

A proposal to consolidate public safety departments has drawn fierce disagreement in the Place 1 race. Incumbent Leffingwell and challenger Jason Meeker have sparred during the campaign over the plan to move park police, airport police and marshals into the Police Department.

Leffingwell was a sponsor of the council resolution that gave negotiators instructions to pursue consolidation. Proponents of the move have said it would allow for equal pay and uniform standards for all law enforcement officers employed by the city.

Meeker said consolidating the departments isn't a good idea. He cited a recent report by the city auditor and MGT of America Inc. released in March that said consolidation would pose organizational challenges and lead to higher costs, especially in the beginning to bring the other officers' salaries in line with those of Austin Police Department officers, the highest-paid in the state.

"Consolidation seems like it would be a good idea immediately, but when we look at a city that does have budget challenges, it seems like it's an unnecessary thing to do," Meeker said.

Leffingwell said it is too early in the negotiation and budget processes to specify what the trade-offs might be. The sooner negotiations conclude the more accurate the budget planning can be, he said.

"I would hope that the agreement contains efficiencies that will allow us to cut the cost of public safety without any quality reductions in public safety that we provide here today," Leffingwell said.

Allen Demling, who is also in the Place 3 race, said he favors consolidation of other officers under the Austin Police Department because it would give all the law enforcement officers equal representation.

Candidates Robin Cravey and Laura Morrison in the Place 4 race to replace Betty Dunkerley questioned increases in public safety spending and the guaranteed raises.

Galindo, who is competing against Cravey and Morrison, said public safety spending should be looked at more holistically and in terms of the entire city budget, not just the general fund.

The general fund, which pays for a variety of programs including public safety and parks, makes up \$592 million of the city's \$2.5 billion budget.

Jennifer Gale, Sam Osemene and Kenneth Vasseau are also running for the Place 4 seat.

"Let's focus on the results," Galindo said. "Let's focus on creating an environment where we expect those results to be achieved."

Cravey said other departments, such as parks and libraries, that come out of the general fund budget should not lose funding to increase public safety spending. And the public safety premium needs to go, he said.

"We have some of the most highly paid public safety workers in the state, if not the nation," Cravey said. "I think we can stay above market rate with those workers and still realize some savings."

Morrison said she appreciates public safety agencies but worries about having to cut social service programs to fund them. She said focusing on the root causes of crime and public health issues could be a way to reduce public safety spending in the future.


"The perspective that I bring is understanding the need and priority for public safety, but also looking at how to balance our key priorities and trade-offs," Morrison said. "If we increase our budget for public safety, where is it going to come from?"

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