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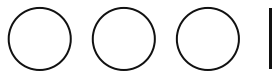
GILBERT GARCIA

Garcia: Repealing collective bargaining for police would put S.A. in alignment with other Texas cities



Gilbert Garcia, Metro Columnist

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Co-founder Oji Martin (from left) and Deputy Director Ananda Tomas of FixSAPD bring boxes of 20,000 collected signatures for the city clerk to certify in hopes of putting the repeal of Chapter 174 on the May ballot on Friday, Jan. 8, 2021. The volunteer organization wants Chapters 174 and 143 which deal with collective bargaining and discipline procedures within the San Antonio Police Department - both of which FixSAPD want to repeal. Friday's presentation of 20,000 signatures was for the repeal of Chapter 174.

Kin Man Hui, San Antonio Express-News / Staff photographer

If Fix SAPD succeeds in its mission to eliminate collective bargaining for police officers, the city would have to formulate a new process for negotiating police contracts.

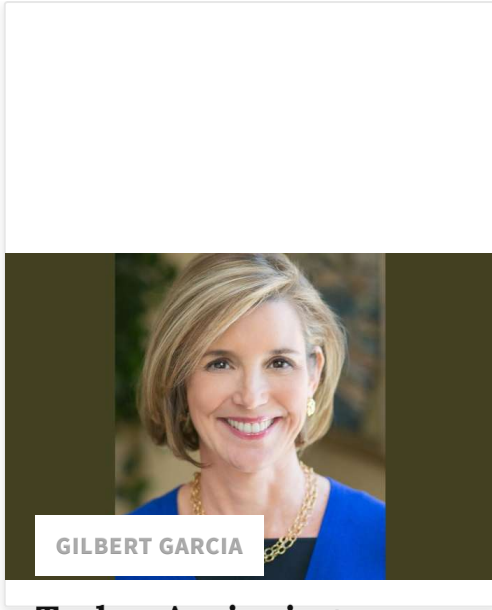
That would almost certainly mean a move to a meet-and-confer system.

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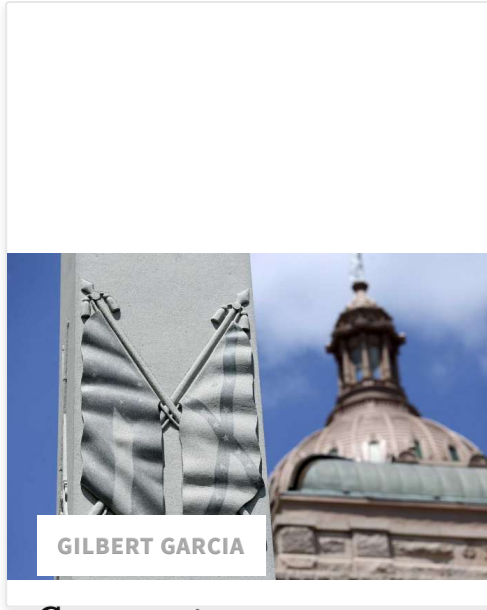
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While some defenders of collective bargaining tend to describe such a move as a potential traumatic blow to labor relations in San Antonio, if this city went to meet and confer, we'd actually be in alignment with the other big cities in Texas.

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Commentary

At this point, San Antonio is the Texas outlier with its use of collective bargaining.

Fix SAPD has submitted a petition calling for the repeal of collective bargaining. If the city clerk determines that at least 20,000 signatures are valid, the repeal initiative will be on San Antonio's May ballot.

In 2006, when Fort Worth voters were given the chance to pass meet and confer, that city's business community depicted meet and confer as a dangerous expansion of the bargaining powers of police associations – a gateway drug to collective bargaining.

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In San Antonio, you often hear the opposite perspective, particularly from supporters of the police union. Here, union advocates suggest that a move to meet and confer would weaken the union to the point where the bargaining process would be compromised.

Bottom line: Both the 2006 Fort Worth and the 2021 San Antonio warnings are overstated.

Just ask Ken Casaday, the president of the Austin Police Association. Austin has been operating under meet and confer since 1995, and Casaday says he sees meet and confer and collective bargaining as “very similar” processes.

The major difference is that under collective bargaining, city management is obligated to bargain with the police association. Under meet and confer, it's optional.

For members of Fix SAPD. who think collective bargaining gives too much leverage

to the police union, and therefore stands in the way of stronger police accountability measures, meet and confer is a better bet.

“Under this new system, we could have strong pay and benefits for officers, while protecting citizens and keeping the police officers accountable,” said EJ Pinnock, Fix SAPD board member, during an interview on the San Antonio Express-News’ Puro Politics podcast.

During the first decade of meet and confer in Austin, police salaries went up 90 percent. Austin police officers are currently the highest paid in the state.

Casaday said Austin police officers have relinquished some power on disciplinary issues in exchange for better pay and benefits packages.

“San Antonio is fighting a (meet-and-confer) process that we adopted many years ago,” Casaday said. “We have pretty strong oversight in our city and have had it for about 18 years now. You’ve got to weigh what you’re willing to put up with.”

In 2017, Austin negotiated a new contract with its police officers, but community activists argued that it didn’t do enough to address issues of officer misconduct. As a result, the Austin City Council unanimously rejected the deal.

Nearly a year later, a new contract emerged. The deal revamped Austin’s Office of the Police Monitor into a stronger, more transparent Office of Police Oversight, which has the ability to accept complaints (including ones submitted anonymously), initiate its own complaints and follow up with complainants as investigations uncover additional information.

In exchange for this stricter oversight, Austin police officers received a 7 percent pay raise over four years.

Puro Politics

Episode Title	Duration	Date
Episode 130: The Fix SAPD Interview	00:32:21	Feb 1, 2021
Episode 129: Policing the Police	00:27:25	Jan 25, 2021
Episode 128: Inaugural Special	00:27:43	Jan 20, 2021
Episode 127: The Joaquin Castro Interview	00:27:39	Jan 11, 2021
Episode 126: Straus Stands Up for Electoral Process	00:26:10	Jan 04, 2021
Episode 125: 2020 Recap		

“Our officers are scrutinized and investigated on a very regular basis, because of complaints that are sent in by citizens,” Casaday said.

“With our meet and confer, where both sides agree on issues that we want to talk about, we’ve never told the city ‘no’ up-front to anything.”

Michael Mata, the president of the Dallas Police Association, has a decidedly less positive opinion of meet and confer than Casaday.

Mata contends that the meet-and-confer process, as it has been applied in Dallas, doesn't allow the police association to negotiate anything but officer salaries.

"We wanted collective bargaining but we had to settle for meet and confer," Mata said. "We really don't have the ability to negotiate any type of health care, policy, any type of governing rules.

"We just fall under whatever plan the city chooses to give us. Unfortunately, the only thing we're able to work out and discuss is pay, and that's only however much the council wants to discuss it."

In San Antonio, a shift to meet and confer wouldn't necessarily mean a dramatic change. It would, however, give the city some leverage on accountability issues.

When asked if he thinks Austin police officers would be better off under a collective-bargaining system like the one in San Antonio, Casaday sounded skeptical.

"I really don't," he said. "Because our fire department has it, and we've always done better than they have."

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Gilbert Garcia is a native of Brownsville, Texas, with more than 20 years experience writing for weekly and daily newspapers. A graduate of Harvard University, he has won awards for his reporting on music, sports, religion, and politics. He is the author of the 2012 book, "Reagan's Comeback: Four Weeks in Texas That Changed American Politics Forever," published by Trinity University Press. One of his feature stories also appeared in the national anthology, "Da Capo Best Music Writing 2001."

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