

CRIME...

We Might Just Be Getting Ready to See a **Real Surge!**

[CRIME is not just committed by criminals. Sometimes it's a crime to not do the right thing.]



by Kat Rowoldt

What follows is critical. Every San Angeloan needs to prayerfully consider the consequences if this situation is allowed to continue. And yes, you need to do something. See the last paragraph.

There is a very subtle tug-of-war waging between a couple of entities here in San Angelo. It has become the fodder of conversations and a bullet point for candidates. But it's time to lay aside the malarkey and especially the propaganda. I for one, as a citizen, nearly jumped out of my seat at City Council recently, and it's time to share the story in light of what is pending. Let me lay a bit of background down for you.

One of the hot topics in town lately, actually you could say for the last several months, has been the rise in crime. Most every one of us knows someone who has been a victim, if not having been the victim ourselves. Home invasions, horror stories of awakening in the middle of the night with someone in your home, or finding your vehicle the next morning with busted out windows and items stolen. This isn't the San Angelo we know and love. We want our "San Angelo" back. Times have changed. Society has changed. Crime has changed.

While there are several critical parts to this complete story; from the catch-and-release program as a result of the shortage in housing of prisoners, to not enough officers to meet minimum standards recommended by the FBI, I want to focus on only one of these issues. This is a critical area of concern. Our shortage of police officers is serious and could become extreme in short order.

People have had various views and opinions on pay for the San Angelo Police Officers. I dare say that most verbiage that has been spouted about has had very little fact with it and lots of emotion. Your source of information can greatly sway on which side of the fence you are standing.

When Chief Carter took office in July, he walked into an office which was already short-handed. He made some immediate critical changes in scheduling

that amazingly allowed more officers to be on the street without unnecessary overtime. The officers whom I have spoken with have greatly appreciated the changes and the overall work environment improvement.

Based on the size of our city, it is recommended we have a minimum of 180 officers. Today we have 155 officers with 11 future officers attending academy now. That is a shortage of 25 officers working the streets today.

Reality is, several of these cadets may not finish the academy successfully or their three months on the street training. There is an officer retiring next month, plus there are a few officers out on medical leave. The hard numbers of who is working in our community is way below standards.

A long discussed problem is the fact many of the cadets who do finish their training program, do not stay. Just ninety miles to our north, in Abilene, they can start with \$15,000 additional dollars per year from day one. Most law enforcement departments are willing to pay the extremely low \$2,000 penalty fee if they choose to leave San Angelo within two years of their graduation from the academy.

Add to that the recruiting problem. It once was not unusual for the SAPD to have over one hundred applicants a few years back. That is a distant memory now. It's not surprising to realize the number of applicants fell significantly when police officers became the target. The assassinations in Dallas on July 7th, 2016 - 13 officers shot, 5 died, sent a chilling warning through anyone who was considering law enforcement as an occupation. In fact, departments across the state began seeing their officers quit or retire abruptly.

Back to San Angelo.

I can remember sitting in the Meet & Confer meetings watching Sgt. Korby Kennedy doing his best to negotiate with the city for our officers' pay. He and Sgt. Brian Robinson had asked me to come by the station one afternoon when that round of meetings was just starting. They wanted to show me the numbers on what it was costing the city of San Angelo to train officers, only to have them leave, because the pay was not competitive with similar cities. The numbers were staggering. If we only took some of those lost training dollars and applied them to the officer's pay, we probably could have the solid force we need and save the taxpayers countless dollars. I was convinced after seeing the numbers.

I began attending the Meet & Confer meetings to see what was happening. After several months of negotiations, the City made a deal with the officers and they accepted the three year stair-stepped plan.

I could not believe my ears when I heard the City was asking the officers to forego their 3rd year pay increase. My heart sank, remembering Sgt. Kennedy and what I felt had been a legacy he had left to his fellow officers - the pay increase. As if that wasn't bad enough, the final blow came a few weeks later in City Council.

Lisa Marley, City of San Angelo Human Resources & Risk Management Director, was discussing the City health insurance program and what it was going to cost each of the city employees with the cost increases. Each employee was looking at paying out of pocket something like \$5-\$20 more per month. To me, that sounded wonderful. Most of us citizens/taxpayers realized anywhere from \$100-\$250/month increase in our health insurance costs. Then to my utter disbelief, I heard Ms. Marley thank the police officers for foregoing their pay increases so all the other city employees would not have to pay that increased cost for medical insurance. What?!!

What just happened?

Crime is rising in our community. We are having a hard time finding anyone who wants to become a police officer. We just stripped away the pay increase which was contractually promised and already set in motion with our current police officers and we are supposed to sit back and think this was the right thing to do? We need police protection. We need a safe community. We don't need dog parks and statuary. Why are city employees being protected from the harsh reality medical insurance went up for everyone?

Chief Carter in trying to work with the City during this economic downturn in our community, pulled the plug on the SAPD relocating to the bank building the previous Police Chief encouraged them to buy for the department. The cost of renovating the building for their needs was going to be something like \$35-40 million dollars. He reported that he and his officers would rather make things work in their current facilities and use some of the allocated money to give his officers the pay increases that they need to keep the force strong.

While a few citizens have thought our officers were being paid more than enough, even though cities similar in size paid more, reality is the full picture was not being presented to us. I was reminded of a time about eight years ago when the Border Patrol was given funding to increase their manpower. In one fell swoop the SAPD lost forty-six officers. Six officers went directly to the Border Patrol. They were easy picking since they offered more money and most could still live in this area. The Border Patrol was hiring 3000 officers. They pulled from cities all around the state. The other forty officers went to various police departments to fill those vacancies caused by the Border Patrol.

So here we are today. Not only is the Border Patrol gearing up to hire 5000 more officers, but President Trump is looking at hiring 10,000 more agents for Homeland Security. Hooray!!!

While we are all excited about the increased number of officers who will be working our borders and protecting our state, the flipside is the immediate impact this will potentially have on the number of officers we have working here in San Angelo. If the same thing repeated itself again like it happened eight years ago, we would have a hundred officers or less to work our streets. What if even more left this time?

How must the officers feel after working so hard to negotiate a contract with the City to raise their salaries over a three-year period of time and to have it ripped away in its final year? Is that "trust" factor broken?

On Thursday of last week, Meet & Confer met again. This time it was to offer the officers a "stipend." The officers said "no." They want and they deserve the pay increases that were contractually given to them three years ago.

The City of San Angelo Information Office put out this press release after the meeting:

The City of San Angelo is disappointed our police officers opposed the City Council's offer of a one-time lump sum payment of \$317,980. That payment would have met the obligations of the Meet & Confer contract for the remainder of the current fiscal year. At the same time, it would have bridged a gap to allow City management, the San Angelo Coalition of Police and the City Council to work together to increase officers' pay moving forward.

The result of the officers' vote will terminate the Meet & Confer process through which their pay is negotiated. If and when that process continues will be a decision of the SACOP membership.

The leadership of the City of San Angelo values all of its employees, including its first-responders. That's precisely why improving the pay of our public servants has for three years now been one of the City Council's five approved priorities. Unfortunately, in the current economic climate, doing so is not possible without slashing service levels or further taxing the pocketbooks of our citizens. Our leadership team will continue to work toward ensuring that all City employees earn a livable and competitive wage for the first-rate services they provide.

If I have ever read propoganda - this is it! What a manipulated statement. The police association responded with their own statement the following day.

City Manager Plans to Default on Police Meet and Confer Agreement; More Broken Promises

San Angelo Police look to the Mayor and Council to Honor the Amended Meet and Confer Agreement

San Angelo, Texas March 16, 2017: At 10:05 AM this morning the City of San Angelo Meet and Confer Committee convened at City Hall and San Angelo Coalition of Police President Doug Thomas informed the City's Staff that SAPD Officers voted to reject a lesser offer represented by City Manager's Staff on March 6, 2017. Sixty Two percent (62%) of the officers voting, voted to rejected the most recent offer and instead look to San Angelo City Council to honor their Amended Agreement which promised a salary increase to bring San Angelo Police to 95% of the median salary level of area departments.

On March 6th, the Police Negotiation Team agreed to a vote by officers for a onetime lump sum payment option in lieu of salary adjustments agreed to in the Meet and Confer Agreement which were formerly ratified by City Council. At that Meet and Confer Committee meeting, City Staff indicated that there is no money in the budget for raises, but that the City confessed that it could fund a onetime stipend for police at \$317,980. When questioned by members of the Police Negotiation Team, City Staff commented that the city could fund an additional \$540,000 for stipends for fire and non-civil service employees as well.

After today's Committee Meeting, SACOP's President Doug Thomas offered comments explaining why officers voted not to accept a onetime payment. 1.) Officers were asked back in September 2016 to forgo salary increases due on October 1st, 2016 until April 1, 2017, so that the City could offset raising Insurance Premiums for all employees. The officers agreed to continue their then current salary level and delay contractual increases until April 1, 2017. In fact the City was financially capable at that time to fund the contractual salary increases, but police agreed to do their part to help City Officials maintain solid financial commitment for services. 2.) City Staff has apparently now found the funding necessary to fulfill police salary commitments, but chooses to place less priority on honoring its original promises today than it did when City Council ratified the Original and Amended Agreements.

After viewing the City's Press Release, President Doug Thomas further indicated that the members of the San Angelo Police Department are very disappointed to see that City Management is attempting to blame officers for the City's refusal to honor its commitments and promises. The Agreements between the City and San Angelo Coalition of Police on behalf of police officers are more than just mere words; they involve trust and they also involve legal commitments. We (SACOP) negotiated, in good faith, a series of pay increases to bring police pay in line with other comparable cities. Years of inferior salary increases resulted in San Angelo Police Department becoming on revolving door for young people interested in law enforcement. Once San Angelo Citizens paid all the costs associated with recruiting and training young talent, these folks would leave San Angelo for higher paying Cities. We joined with City Management and agreed to contractual implement annual salary increases geared to improve salary levels on the Police Department in order to stop the revolving door effect on turnovers at the PD and become more cost efficient with tax payer money.

Officers have trusted the City to honor their commitments. Now it appears City Management is opting to play the "Blame Game" in an attempt to disguise reality. The reality is that the City of San Angelo can fund contractual police salary increases from current revenue sources, however, it chooses to play games instead and claim that police are to blame. Not True!

A onetime payment leaves our members to face additional years of being underpaid, killing morale and damaging our efforts to recruit and retain talented individuals into our department. San Angelo Citizens pay for and deserve better efforts by City Staff.

The City told us they didn't have the money to fulfill their promises. Now that they have admitted to having the funds, they want to negate the raises that the San Angelo officers have delayed, in good faith, based on the City's word. San Angelo has always been a place where your word is your bond. All the officers of this department want is for the City Management's word to mean the same.

This Tuesday, March 21st, it will be reported back to Council that SACOP turned down the offer of the stipend. A decision will be made by the City Council at that time as to what will be done. If they do not honor the contract which was made three years ago, April 1st the officers pay will roll back to the rates they were in 2013, plus they will have to fire several officers, lowering even further the number of men and women serving on our police force. Our officers need to see a strong turnout at City Council backing the badge, in my opinion.

We can do without some perks and do what is right for our officers. We need to encourage our Council members to vote to pay the officers what had been contractually agreed upon previously. It's not worth the risk of our officers walking away for higher pay with potentially new offers coming their way any day now.

What do you think our community would be like if we have a sudden loss of officers during this time of increased crime throughout our city? Is that dog park or pretty statuary really that important when you weigh it against the safety of your loved ones?

I pray you will take this to heart and decide to set aside your schedule Tuesday morning and show up for City Council at 8:30. Our Council members need to hear our voices in large numbers, supporting our officers and their pay increases. Actually - I think our Police Officers need to hear it too!

Until next time

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