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Houston firefighters to receive 18 percent raises, despite concerns about funding source

Jasper Scherer, Staff writer

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City Council on Wednesday approved a cumulative 18 percent pay raise over three years for Houston firefighters, though the fire union continues to push for a contract.
J. Patric Schneider, Freelance / For the Chronicle

City Council on Wednesday unanimously approved an 18 percent pay raise for Houston firefighters over three years using a portion of the city's federal stimulus relief, despite concerns raised by council members and the fire union about how the salaries would be funded once the aid runs out.

Council already had approved a 6 percent pay raise for firefighters that takes effect Thursday, when the city's next fiscal year begins. The ordinance approved Wednesday grants firefighters a cumulative 18 percent raise by July 2023, though union officials continue to push for a new contract with the city, which they say is the only way to lock the raises in place.

"Let there be no misunderstanding, these are not permanent raises. They are temporary bonuses funded with temporary dollars provided through the American Rescue Plan Act," Houston Professional Fire Fighters Association President Marty Lancton said. "While grateful for the money from the federal government, Houston firefighters and their families want, need and deserve the security that comes with a binding labor contract."

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Firefighters have noted that because the raises are coming through an ordinance, City Council could amend or repeal the pay increase at any point.

Mayor Sylvester Turner, who has been locked in a pay dispute with the fire union since 2017, called on the union to drop a lawsuit it filed against the city that year, in which firefighters argue their compensation falls short of the levels required by state law. As part of the suit, the union has asked a state district judge to set their pay, a step laid out in Texas' collective bargaining laws when a public employer declines to settle a contract impasse through arbitration. Until now, firefighters had received raises of just 3 percent since 2011, after turning down previous offers they said included too many concessions.

"Now, there are some that will say, well mayor, it's not a contract. So, what does it mean?" Turner said. "Well, do people want us to wait until the firefighters, the union, drop their lawsuits? Or do they want the pay raise now? And I think for most of the firefighters, they want their money now."

District C council member Abbie Kamin, who chairs the City Council Public Safety and Homeland Security Committee, said the raises are important for making Houston "comparable and competitive with other cities" in the amount it pays its firefighters, though she said the city will "need to take a really hard look at how we deal with this down the road" when federal funds dry up.

"This is the right thing to do, but it also does put us in a position several years down the road, when ARPA funding runs, out that we need to be responsible for within our

budget," Kamin said.

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Turner's second and final term ends Jan. 2, 2024.

Though Turner called on firefighters to drop the collective bargaining lawsuit, his administration last week asked the Texas Supreme Court to overturn a recent appellate court ruling in the case. The appellate court rejected the city's argument that it is unconstitutional for judges to determine the pay of firefighters and police officers without firmer guidelines for doing so.

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Meanwhile, firefighters are collecting signatures for a charter amendment that would require the city to enter arbitration if contract talks break down. Turner has declined firefighters' repeated requests to settle the pay dispute through an independent panel, arguing that doing so would "leave it up to someone else to determine the fate of Houston taxpayers" and threaten the city's credit rating.

The city also has joined the Houston Police Officers' Union in a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Proposition B, a ballot measure approved by voters in 2018 that granted firefighters the same pay as police of similar rank and seniority. A state district judge found the measure unconstitutional, but the fire union appealed the ruling.

As council members discussed the raises Wednesday, several said they believed the pay increase was long overdue, while also raising concerns about the funding source.

"We all know that we've got funding for three years and then it drops off," said District

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our revenues and our budgets year to year, that will be enough if we can hold our spending. But we've got to be thinking about that today, because the three years will be here sooner than you think."

District J council member Ed Pollard noted the raises ended a decade of stagnant pay for firefighters, even as funding challenges loomed.

"Today, we're doing something. And today we're doing more than has been done in a long time," Pollard said. "... And yes, this is for three years, and yes, we will have to figure out what to do in the future. But that's what we do."

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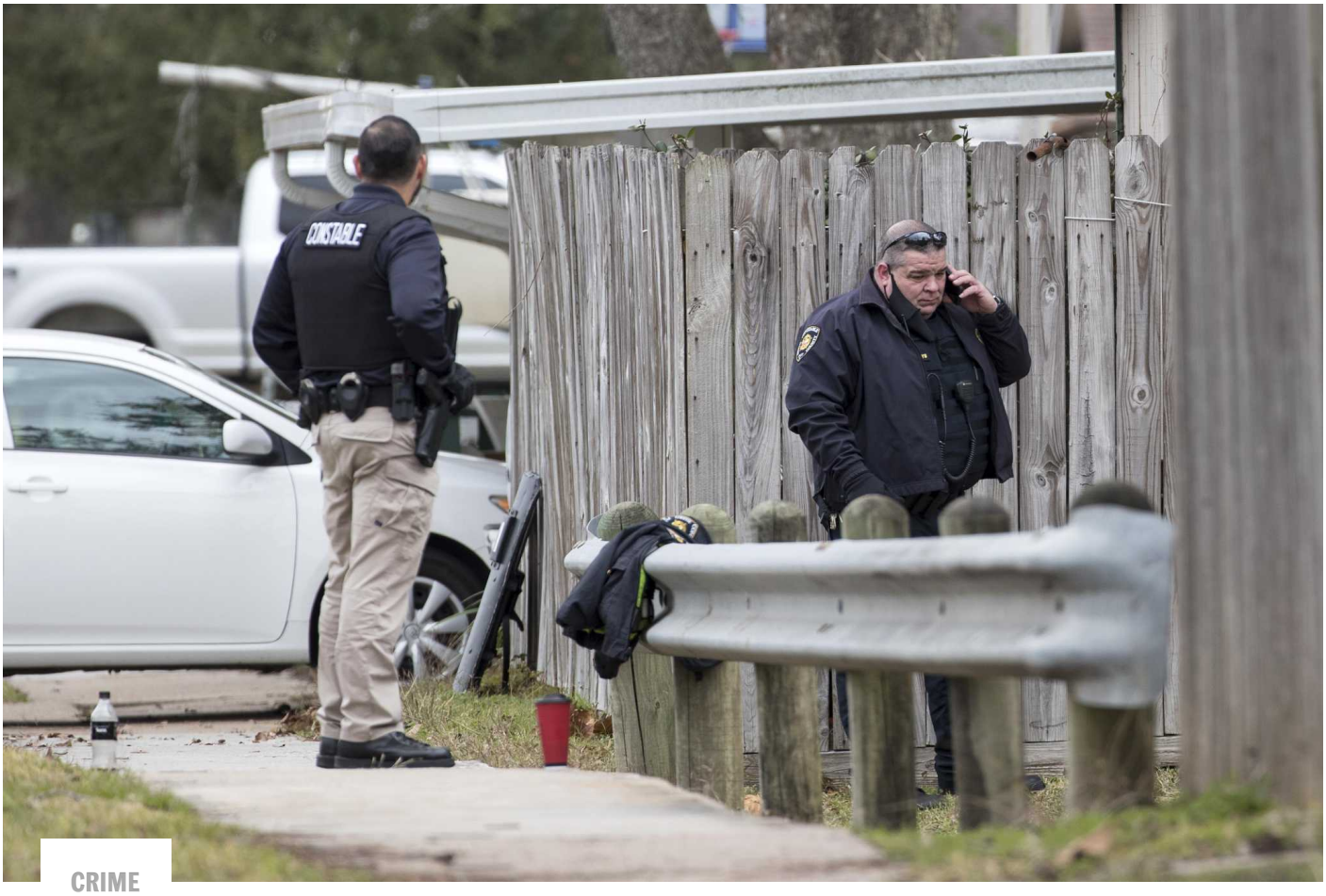

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