



WHATCOM COUNTY COMMISSION ON SALARIES
FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Minutes

Thursday, March 2, 2023, 4:00 PM
Virtual Meeting

ATTENDANCE:

Members Present: Linda Stone, Lance Calloway, Dewey Desler, Karen Funston, Lori Province, Jeremy Irwin, Michael Anderson, Piper Mertle (newest member)
Members Absent: Beth Vonnegut; Rebecca Shaddix
Staff/Guests Present: Stacey Carroll, Facilitator

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Commission Chair Dewey Desler at 4:02 pm.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chair Desler called for a motion to approve the Minutes of 2/16/23. The motion was made by Lance Calloway and seconded by Karen Funston. The vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously 8-0.

3. INTRODUCTION OF NEW COMMISSIONER

Ms. Carroll relayed that county legal staff instructed that the position vacated by James Runyon should be filled, and so a new person has since been appointed by the County Executive and County Council. Ms. Carroll introduced Piper Mertle. Ms. Mertle briefly spoke about her background and noted she is happy to fulfill her civic duty by participating the work of this commission. Piper was welcomed by Chair Desler. He went on to note that an additional resignation has occurred: Beth Vonnegut has resigned just this week, citing health concerns.

4. PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

5. DISCUSSION WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

Chair Desler introduced Prosecuting Attorney Eric Richey and he encouraged all commissioners to carefully review the written materials previously submitted by Mr. Richey. Mr. Richey introduced himself and thanked the commissioners for inviting him to address the group. As noted in his letter to commissioners, he said his main request is that his salary match that of the Superior Court Judge. In the past this has occurred, but was untied (no longer matched) in 2017. The 2021 Salary Commission explored this issue but they ultimately did not provide the match because the county's fiscal budget year differs from the State's fiscal year which is July. Also they didn't believe they had this authority under the Charter. In 2023 the disparity has grown to \$7,111.00. A true match is possible and an independent legal opinion supports this through interpretation of County Charter and Code. A mid-year adjustment is possible, per the Finance Manager. Mr. Richey respectfully requests a return to the match with Superior Court Judge. He also asks that \$7,111 be added to the salary for the first half of 2024 to make up for the past inequity.

Mr. Calloway asked about the \$7,111 adjustment; is this permitted according to the Charter? Mr. Richey indicated it is and that other counties have also done this. It could be added to the first half of 2024 (split) on a monthly basis. Discussion continued. Chair Desler added comments regarding the difficulties around the different fiscal years of State and County. Ms. Carroll provided a reminder about the scope of the responsibility of setting salaries for January 2024 and the commission has wide discretion around how those figures are derived.

Steve Oliver addressed the group and commented that salary adjustments are routinely made throughout the year through employment contracts, union negotiations and the like.

6. INFORMATION REVIEW

Ms. Carroll provided a couple of updates: 1) Additional written comments from Steve Oliver were provided for this meeting, and will be added to the official agenda packet for today's meeting; 2) There is an update to the COLA chart due to a midyear adjustment in 2021. She went on to show a new spreadsheet she prepared that provides a summary of data. Comparison of counties data was defined, as were salary comparisons within counties. 8-county, 6-county and 5-county comparisons. The salaries of City of Bellingham Police Chief and COB councilmembers were provided in the summary sheet as well. She referenced the difference between median data vs. mean data. She suggested that the commission begin talking about methodology and she can assist with mathematical processes if needed. Ms. Province questioned how best to approach the methodology and consider the use of comparative county information as suggested by more than one of the elected officials. Chair Desler said there is flexibility in how the commission may choose to approach the data and methodology. Ms. Carroll also showed a graph with Consumer Price index, 3% in 2020; by May of 2022 up 9%.

7. COMMISSIONER DISCUSSION

How to proceed and which factors should be considered first? Discussion about whether to work on each individual elected separately or use comparables or other data across the board. Ms. Funston believes its important to use the county comparable figures and supports focusing on individual positions separately.

Ms. Carroll suggested starting with a focus on the Prosecuting Attorney and then moving on to the County Council and to discuss methodology for each of those. Chair Desler asked Ms. Carroll to get verification on some of the input received by electeds: ask HR and also the Finance Manager about the process of directly linking the payment to the Prosecuting Attorney with the payment system from the State. She will do so and bring that information back to the commissioners. The letter from the Prosecutor Richey was reviewed briefly and questions arose about the meaning of the "tied to" section of the legislation. Further clarification on the intent may be needed. Mr. Calloway asked Ms. Carroll to also report on the \$7,111 figure to be spread out over the first six months – is that easily accomplished?

There was some further discussion about the work of the previous commission and being careful not to undo that work nor overly re-examine the work that was already done then (relating to Prosecuting Attorney). Mr. Calloway pointed out that its not the commission's responsibility to make the technicalities work, rather to provide recommendations and allow HR to sort out the technicalities on assigning salaries. It was pointed out by Ms. Carroll that the commission has the flexibility to choose to state in their recommendations to align the salary of the PA with the Superior Court Judge (as opposed to stating a specific dollar amount). Ms. Province reminded everyone about the key point involving the requirement that the salary rate of the County Executive not fall below that of the Prosecuting Attorney.

Mr. Calloway suggested the commission begin with reviewing the County Executive's salary. Chair Desler invited comments and there was a brief roundtable of comments/questions from all members. Ms. Carroll pointed out the comparable salaries of the Sheriff and Bellingham Police Chief may also be considered. A question was raised about whether the commission also reviews benefits for these positions. Ms. Carroll said she doesn't believe so but she'll double check on that point as well. Chair Desler suggests at the next meeting the discussion include the comparable salaries of the Sheriff and Police Chief. He also wants to discuss the mechanics of trying to match the PA's salary with the Superior Court Judge. Ms. Carroll said that at this point there are no other agenda items for the next meeting so the group will have the full two hours to discuss these and possibly other positions as well.

8. The next meeting is March 16th, 4pm. Mr. Calloway mentioned he will be unable to attend that meeting due to being in transit at that time. A couple of comments he'll make now for later consideration is that the Sheriff currently receives 12.13% less than the PA. Maybe given his wide scope of responsibilities consider bringing this up to perhaps within 5% of the PA salary. As for the County Executive, tie that salary to the Superior Court Judge plus 3%, and the PA (mirrored) at the Superior Court Judge salary level. The county council member salaries could be re-considered as well given the comments that some of them work up to 35-40 hours a week.

9. ADJOURN

A motion to adjourn was made by Karen Funston, seconded by Lance Calloway; the vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously 8-0 – meeting adjourned at 6:01 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Suzanne Mildner,
Executive Boards and Committees Clerk
Whatcom County