

**WHATCOM COUNTY COMMISSION ON SALARIES
FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS**

MINUTES

Thursday, April 18, 2019, 4:00 p.m.

**Whatcom Transportation Authority
Board Room
4011 Bakerview Spur
Bellingham, WA**

ATTENDANCE

Members Present: Bonne Broadway, Justin Iverson, Steve King, Karen Peila, Jon Sitkin, Wayne Tomlinson, Wendy Wefer-Clinton

Members Absent: Lisa Karlberg, Todd Morris, Martin Watterson

Staff Present: Andy Rowson-WTA Director of Human Resources and Commission Facilitator, Vicki Esser-WTA Executive Assistant/ Clerk of the Board and Commission Administrative Assistant

Others Present: Eric Richey (Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney)
Steve Oliver (Whatcom County Treasurer)

A. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Jon Sitkin at 4:01 p.m.

B. APPROVAL OF MAR. 21, 2019 MINUTES

MOTION BY WEFER-CLINTON, SECONDED BY IVERSON TO APPROVE THE MINUTES FROM THE MARCH 21, 2019 MEETING.

The motion passed unanimously.

C. PUBLIC COMMENT

C.1 Steve Oliver - Treasurer

Treasurer Steve Oliver submitted some information by email and also gave a verbal statement. He stated he does not believe using data from comparable counties is sufficient. He said there is significant wage compression between elected officials and their second in command. He said if you look at that issue across the County organization, it does not exist anywhere else. He said if we are going to be equitable and fair, the commission has the opportunity to address this.

C.2 Eric Richey – Prosecuting Attorney

Prosecuting Attorney Eric Richey submitted a letter and also made a verbal statement. He stated when you look at the six comparable counties the commission has selected, they support tying the salary to the State Superior Court Judge. He said he thinks the commission should look at the median, not the average. Mr. Richey commented that the commission’s current proposal puts the Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney under other counties by about 10%. He said most County employees could ask for a realignment if their salary is 3% under. He said Cowlitz County has a 37.5 hour work week and they will be paid higher than Whatcom County within a year and a half. Mr. Richey stated that the proposal puts Whatcom County at the lowest of all the comparable counties and under the average. He asked the commission to consider the question, “Why is the Whatcom County Prosecutor less valuable than at other counties?” Mr. Richey asked that the commission match the Prosecuting Attorney salary to the State Superior Court Judge salary, as has been done in the past and is recommended in the law.

D. SALARY PLACEMENTS

D.1 Review Draft Salary Placement Document

Mr. Rowson reviewed the draft salary placements document that was based on the decisions made at the March 21st meeting.

E. DISCUSSION

E.1 Salary Placement Conclusions

MOTION BY IVERSON, SECONDED BY KING TO APPROVE USING THE PROPOSED 2.23% COST OF LIVING ADJUSTMENT (COLA) THAT IS BASED ON THE AVERAGE OF THE PAST FIVE YEARS OF THE WEST URBAN CONSUMER PRICE INDEX – ALL URBAN CONSUMERS.

The motion passed unanimously.

Chairperson Sitkin stated his belief that the proposed salaries are woefully under where they should be for executive salaries. He stated that elected officials are on duty 24/7, they have to run for re-election which can be a significant cost, and if we want quality people who have experience and qualifications, we need higher salaries. He opened discussion on the proposed salary placements.

Main points of the discussion and/or comments by commission members were:

Discussion Concerning Salaries for All Positions

- There is no incentive for the deputy to run for the elected office if the salary is only \$300 per month more than the deputy’s salary.

- There is often a 10% differential between a top position and their second.
- A large amount of personal money is often spent on campaigns by those seeking election or re-election
- Salaries are not in line with other top positions in the County
- Elected officials in the County, except for the Prosecuting Attorney, have no requirements for qualifications, education, or experience. Their deputies do have requirements.
- Higher salaries help attract candidates who are highly qualified.
- The commission represents the citizens and has to justify these decisions to them.
- The Commission should consider the data from comparable counties. Questions were raised regarding the appropriate Counties for comparison.

Discussion on County Council Salary

- The County Council can be a full-time job even though it is considered part-time.
- The lowest paid legislative clerk to the council is paid around \$47,000 a year, significantly more than council members.
- Whatcom County has a matching deferred compensation program. It is believed that comparable counties do not.

Discussion on Prosecuting Attorney Salary

- If equated to a full-time private practice attorney, the salary might attract some, but not all.
- Judges generally work fewer hours than a Prosecutor.
- If the salary does not match the Superior Court Judge, it should be closer.
- The State pays half the amount of a Superior Court Judge's salary to the Prosecutor and Whatcom County pays the rest of the salary.
- In the "Intent Statement" of the law, the legislature expressed that the salary should be tied to the Superior Court Judge, but it is not a requirement.
- The State Salary Commission that set the judges salaries increased the Superior Court Judge salary by 8.5% and 2.5% in 2019 and 2020 respectively, to move toward parity with the federal bench. That has no relevance to Whatcom County.
- 60% of Washington counties do not match their Prosecuting Attorney's salary to the Superior Court Judge.
- Two-thirds of counties tie the salary to the Superior Court Judge in some way.
- State of Washington Attorney General is paid less. It may not be a similar position, but looks like it to a layperson.

MOTION BY SITKIN THAT THE COUNTY COUNCIL BE PAID \$50,000 PER YEAR FOR 2020.

The motion failed for lack of a second.

Further Discussion on County Council Salary

- If we abandon using comparables, what do we base our decisions on and how do we explain it?
- We would want council members to treat the position like a full-time job, even if it is not required to be.
- Previous surveys showed the hours worked by council members varies widely.
- Council members receive medical benefits in addition to salary.
- We want council members who have the experience and knowledge based to adopt reasoned policies and regulations. This may necessitate a higher salary to continue to attract viable candidates.
- What will significant raises for elected officials mean to other positions at the County?
- Where will this money come from? We have to consider the taxpayers.

MOTION BY SITKIN, SECONDED BY TOMLINSON TO INCREASE THE COUNTY COUNCIL SALARIES BY 10% IN 2020 AND 10% IN 2021, PLUS THE 2.23% COLA EACH YEAR.

One member expressed that they are not ready to vote and asked to table this vote until the end of the meeting.

Chairperson Sitkin agreed to table the vote on this motion until later in the meeting.

Discussion on Sheriff Salary

- Currently paid significantly above comparables, but beneath the Undersheriff.
- Has been getting significant raises over the past couple of years.
- County Sheriff has a different scope of issues than the Police Chief in Bellingham. For example, they deal with cross border issues, tribal relations, etc.
- Whatcom County Sheriff is also responsible for the jail. Comparables do not have that responsibility.
- \$300 is not a big enough differential.

Discussion on Treasurer, Assessor, Auditor Salaries

- Keeping the salaries for these three positions the same seems appropriate.
- Adjustments don't go far enough.

- Not a big enough differential between their deputies at 2.5%. Should be at least 5% and moving towards 10%.

MOTION BY IVERSON, SECONDED BY PEILA THAT THE TREASURER, ASSESSOR, AND AUDITOR SALARIES BE INCREASED TO 5% ABOVE THE 2019 TOP STEP OF THEIR DEPUTY, PLUS THE 2.23% COLA FOR 2020. THEN ANOTHER 5% ABOVE THE DEPUTY'S TOP STEP (FOR A TOTAL DIFFERENTIAL OF 10%), PLUS A 2.23% COLA FOR 2021.

The motion passed with six votes in favor and one abstention.

Further Discussion on Prosecuting Attorney Salary

- Not sure if would tie to Superior Court Judge, but would move substantially closer to judges. The proposed differential would be roughly \$20,000 which is too much.
- Responsibilities are high, expertise and skill are needed.
- The job may be more difficult than being a judge.
- Tethering to the judge salary as set by the State would cause loss of control of salary which was a purpose of establishing the Salary Commission and having the Commission establish the Prosecutor's salary..
- The formality of the link to a Superior Court Judge's salary is not concrete. Future Salary Commissions can change it.
- Matching this to the Superior Court Judge would be a hard sell to the public.

MOTION BY SITKIN, SECONDED BY IVERSON TO SET THE PROSECUTING ATTORNEY SALARY AT \$5,000 LESS THAN THE STATE SUPERIOR COURT JUDGES IN 2020 AND 2021, WITH NO COLA.

The motion passed unanimously (7 – 0).

Discussion on County Executive Salary

- Salary should be at least the same as the Prosecuting Attorney
- Historically has been paid more than the Prosecuting Attorney, but the Prosecuting Attorney's salary surpassed the County Executive when tied to the Superior Court Judges.
- County Executive supervises eight times the number of staff and has much broader responsibilities.
- County Executive has professionals under them who make recommendations. Prosecuting Attorney has to make grave decisions about how to charge a crime, whether to pursue the death penalty, etc.
- The suggested salary would not be outside of what a top executive would make at a large company in Whatcom County.

MOTION BY SITKIN, SECONDED BY KING THAT THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE'S SALARY MATCH THE PROSECUTING ATTORNEY'S SALARY.

The motion passed unanimously (7 – 0).

Sheriff

MOTION BY IVERSON, SECONDED BY TOMLINSON THAT THE SHERIFF'S SALARY BE INCREASED TO 5% ABOVE THE 2019 TOP STEP OF THE UNDERSHERIFF, PLUS A 2.23% COLA FOR 2020. THEN ANOTHER 5% ABOVE THE UNDERSHERIFF'S TOP STEP (FOR A TOTAL DIFFERENTIAL OF 10%), PLUS A 2.23% COLA FOR 2021.

The motion passed unanimously (7 – 0).

Final Conclusions

There was general consensus to take a vote on the whole slate of salaries as discussed during the meeting. A comment was made that it would be helpful to calculate actual salary numbers before voting as opposed to just percentages. Facilitator Rowlson responded that he is unable to calculate actual numbers during a meeting. Rough estimates were calculated by individual Commission members instead.

MOTION BY IVERSON, SECONDED BY PEILA AND TOMLINSON TO APPROVE THE WHOLE SLATE OF SALARIES AGREED UPON DURING THIS MEETING.

The motion passed with six votes in favor and one abstention.

F. NEXT STEPS

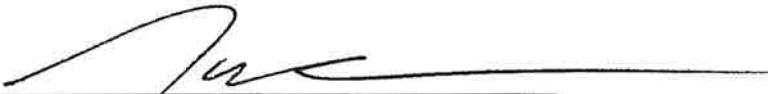
F.1 Discuss Date to Sign Salary Placement Document

Mr. Rowlson stated that he will prepare a draft final document reflecting these decisions and will send it to the Chairperson for review. After the Chairperson's review, the document will be sent to all commission members. A master copy will be made available at WTA for signatures. Once signed, the final document will be submitted to the County by the due date of May 1, 2019.

G. ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned at 6:18 p.m. by Chairperson Sitkin.

**Whatcom County Commission on Salaries for Elected Officials
Whatcom County, Washington**



Jon Sitkin
Chairperson

Attest:



Vicki G. Esser
Commission Administrative Assistant