

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

**MINUTES**

**MONDAY, MARCH 1, 2021 4:00PM**

**Virtual Zoom Meeting**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89927554525?pwd=QXJqMVhMdTgzOC9vcEh1MlcwN3BUdz09>

**ATTENDANCE**

Members Present: Jill Bernstein, Lance Calloway, Dewey Desler, Jim Farmer, Tracie Gultit, Karen Peila, Lori Province, Beth Vonnegut, Matthew Williams

Members Absent: Philip Howell

Staff Present: Kara Turner, Turner HR Consulting and Commission Facilitator, Pat Elwell  
Commission Administrative Assistant

Guests: Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney Eric Richey

**A. CALL TO ORDER**

The meeting was called to order by Chair Dewey Desler at 4:03PM.

**B. APPROVAL OF FEBRUARY 15, 2021 MINUTES**

**Motion was made by Commissioner Lori Province and seconded by Commissioner Jill Bernstein to approve the minutes. The Motion passed unanimously.**

**C. PUBLIC COMMENT**

Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney Eric Richey

- outlined his concerns around the counties selected as comparables;
- requested the commissioners recognize the state legislator found it important to treat Prosecutor similar to Superior Court Judge;
- consider there are no policies that restrict increasing the prosecutor's salary mid-year.

Question and answer followed. Commission Facilitator Kara Turner clarified which materials received from Whatcom County HR were requested and will be considered by the commission.

**D. GENERAL COMMENTS FROM THE CHAIR**

Chair Desler requested each commissioner share their observations and thoughts around the materials they received and the comments they heard from the elected officials at the February 15 meeting with the intent of then considering next steps.

**E. DISCUSSION OF DATA RECEIVED TO-DATE**

Commissioner Bernstein

- There is a compression issue between elected official and second-in-command.

- In addressing compensation, one should take into consideration the complexity of issues being addressed by the position, the number of hours worked and what is needed monetarily to attract good people.
- In considering tying the prosecutor's salary to superior judges, the legislator didn't create a mandate.

Discussion followed.

#### Commissioner Calloway

- Would like to see the compression issue between elected official and second-in-command be addressed.
- Take a look at tying the prosecutor's salary to the superior judge's salary.
- To attract the best to lead the county, compensation needs to be equitable.
- At future meeting discuss/develop a general philosophy around compensation.

Discussion followed.

#### Commissioner Farmer

- Raised the question as to whether the current pandemic should influence any decisions around compensation.

Discussion followed.

#### Commissioner Gulit

- Reflected on the cost of living in Whatcom County; housing costs are significantly higher than in other comparable counties – wages are low compared to housing costs.
- To attract qualified candidates, compensation needs to be competitive.

Discussion followed and the question was raised, "Why are elected officials paid less than department heads?"

#### Commissioner Peila

- Regarding the compression issue, there is the potential for conflict of interest if an elected official's salary is tied to their second-in-command.
- Acknowledged the challenge of defining the appropriate expected hours of work in determining council wages. The Charter needs to be taken into consideration.

Discussion followed.

#### Commissioner Province

- Noted the Salary Commission is the "path" for elected officials to address compensation.
- Queried how to look at and then address the compression issue.

Discussion followed. Chair Desler provided a history of wages at the county, the impact of the County Charter and the collective bargaining process.

#### Commissioner Vonnegut

- Noted that public sector benefits are considered good when compared to private sector.

- Would like to consider tying the Prosecutor’s salary to the Superior Court as well as change the date for to July 1 for wage adjustments.
- Would like the commission to discuss COLAs and the CPI when considering compensation.
- Would like the commission to review county department heads making more than elected officials.

Discussion followed.

Commissioner Williams

- Queried about the qualifications an individual brings to the job and noted that the requirements of the job don’t necessarily align.
- Expressed the desire that compensation attract qualified people to these positions.
- Expressed a broad concern around compression.
  - Who brings more value? The head of the department may not bring as much value as line staff who have a different set of duties.
- Comparing Whatcom County to other counties can help to avoid a “bubble” that could develop if only comparing salaries within Whatcom County

Discussion followed.

The following documents were reviewed and discussion followed:

- Summary Elected Official 2020 Salary Comparison
- Whatcom County Elected Officials & Seconds
- Whatcom County COLA History by Group

Discussion followed.

- Concern was expressed over tying the County Prosecutor position to the Superior Court Judge salary, which is determined by a state salary commission.
- It was suggested to consider making the County Executive position at least equal to that of the County Prosecutor; and both positions be “close to” the Superior Court Judge.
- It was suggested the County Council deserves deliberate discussion, including requesting the Council Chair to speak again before the commission.
  - How do other counties make their decisions on what to pay their councils?
- The commission requested the Commission Facilitator acquire the salary histories of both the Prosecutor and Superior Court Judge.
- The commission also requested the Commission Facilitator in inquire if the county was currently in negotiations with the union(s).

Chair Desler confirmed that the Salary Commission meetings are scheduled to run from 4:00 PM and to end no later than 6:30 PM.

**F. NEXT STEPS**

The next meeting will be Monday, March 15, 2021. Agenda items will include reviewing the Prosecutor and County Council wages as well as to discuss a compensation philosophy.

**G. ADJOURN**

The meeting adjourned at 6:21PM.

---

Minutes approved by the Commission in open public meeting on March 15, 2021.

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

Dewey Desler  
Dewey Desler  
Chair

**Attest:**

---

Patricia F. Elwell  
Commission Administrative Assistant