



WHATCOM COUNTY COMMISSION ON SALARIES  
FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS  
Thursday, March 16, 2023, 4:00 PM  
Virtual Meeting

ATTENDANCE:

Members Present: Linda Stone, Dewey Desler, Karen Funston, Rebecca Shaddix,  
Jeremy Irwin, Michael Anderson, Piper Mertle  
Members Absent: Lance Calloway; Lori Province  
Staff/Guests Present: Stacey Carroll, Facilitator / Eric Richey, George Roche, Vanessa Bonsema,  
Steve Oliver, "observer"

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Commission Chair Dewey Desler at 4:01 pm.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chair Desler called for a motion to approve the Minutes of 3/2/23. The motion was made by Piper Mertle and seconded by Karen Funston. The vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously 7-0.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Desler opened public comments and George Roche, Deputy Prosecuting Attorney, addressed the Commission. He identified his role in the Prosecutor's office and noted he was asked by Mr. Richey to address statutory interpretations of the county code related to authority of the Salary Commission. He referenced a memorandum he had sent to the commission, wherein there was a comparison with Snohomish County, which mirrors Whatcom's code on Salary Commission. They fix PA's salary based on Superior Court judges. Other elected officials have fixed figures but the PA is addressed separately, based on the values set in the RCW.

Chair Desler commented regarding the structure of our government and the link to State government, and noted he's getting a better sense of the reasoning behind the Prosecutor's request for a link between PA salary and SC Judges.

Eric Richey addressed the commission again and reiterated his previous request that the commission adopt this "link" formula, and further requested that they consider adding in a catch-up dollar amount which reflects the gap in salary resulting from the July salary change for the SC Judges. He's asking that he not be left behind as he previously has been (as much as up to \$10,000 gap). He's asking for a catch-up for \$5,435.00. There are a lot of similarities between SC Judge and PA. He's asking that you consider a pay scale that is similar to peer counties.

Steve Oliver, County Treasurer, addressed the commission and said it's been 25 years ago (today) that he began serving Whatcom County. He spoke about the growth of the county and the

significant amount of change in property taxes and budget over these years. He's a strong proponent of all county employees being compensated fairly, especially given the many challenges and changes in the community and the workforce. He asks that the commission be responsive to the situation county government is facing today and be aspirational in your thinking about what we expect the organization to look like in the future.

#### 4. NEW COMMISSIONER PRESENTED TO COUNCIL MARCH 21

Chair Desler announced there is a new commissioner about to join the Salary Commission, and introduced Vanessa Bronsema to the group. County Council will take official action on the appointment on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Vanessa addressed the group and briefly introduced herself. She's the HR Director at Whatcom Transportation Authority and has worked in human resources for a period of about nine years, formerly working for a city. Chair Desler encouraged Ms. Bronsema to review past minutes and earlier reports of previous Salary Commissions in order to bring herself up to date.

#### 5. COMMISSIONER DISCUSSION

Chair Desler invited Ms. Carroll to review some follow-up items from the last meeting. Ms. Carroll started with the topic of benefits, clarifying that the benefits paid to elected officials are outside the scope of the Ordinance for this commission. Another question regarding mid-year pay adjustment; there is no legal reason that would prohibit commissioners from allowing for this as they determine pay levels and there are no concerns about this from HR or Finance departments, or from a budgetary perspective. Another item: there are no restrictions on the amount that can be set by this commission. It is legally allowed to set salaries at whatever level is deemed appropriate and this could include incorporating retroactive corrections (correcting past gaps in pay). However consider the implications of what that might mean: for instance is this intended to re-do what a previous Salary Commission has already done? Or does this set a precedent for going forward? These issues should be carefully weighed before deciding to take this approach. Chair Desler commented on the potential scenario that since all salaries are linked to a percentage of the salary of the Superior Court Judge, whatever the State Salary Commission does would trigger whatever Whatcom County is doing with its salaries for all the positions. Ms. Shaddix spoke in favor of incentivizing good people to take these positions and viewing each position separately rather than tying the positions to another one in this manner.

An additional point that Ms. Carroll made was following up on the question of the County Executive's salary and the lack of comparables for this. It has been recommended that we examine the data that is available from other charter counties. HR can assist in bringing this data forward to the commissioners.

There was brief discussion about the benefits of using exact direct comparable county data sets vs. weighing the benefits of considering approximate salary ranges and performance requirements that more closely match which is needed in Whatcom County. Ms. Shaddix asked is the ballpark data we have before us now enough? And do we need the direct parallels between the counties for a legal or budgetary perspective? Finding data to support the salary ranges being considered. Also performance data is not readily available for electeds' positions. The comparable data gives the commission something objective to start from.

Chair Desler asked for a round-table response from all members. Everyone spoke briefly about the process thus far. Some points raised:

- focusing on roles/skills required for each position rather than the personal capabilities and resumes of the individuals holding the positions;

- the salary levels seem very high compared to what the average citizen is expected to live on in Whatcom County.
- While this may be true its also true that the voters elect these people and the Salary Commission is charged with setting the salaries, and the role the electeds take on has a high level of responsibility and expectations of high level of service.
- The PA office and the Sheriff's office are doing an excellent job and frankly much better than what most citizens believe to be true.
- Support for considering salary increases starting with the level that is currently paid; support for mid-year adjustments to the PA salary
- General agreement with aligning the PA salary with the Superior Court Judge, and perhaps this link could be reversed in future if need be.

Chair Desler asked if there was anyone who is opposed to the PA's salary being linked to the Superior Court Judges? Mr. Anderson said he's not 100% convinced yet that it is the direction to go however at the same time he can't argue against it. Ms. Funston asked if we have all the data on the Superior Court Judge salaries. Ms. Carroll showed the data that is included in the packet that commissioners have received, and there is data there for the 2024 salary. She reminded everyone that the commission can also set salary as a "comparison to X" rather than as a specific number. More discussion on this issue.

Ms. Carroll asked does the commission wish to have more data on the County Executive salary? It might be useful to see some of the data from other counties. Chair Desler requested data from Snohomish County. Chair Desler went on to say that he'll be speaking with Ms. Carroll before the next meeting and would like to frame a series of questions to commission members – these questions will be sent to everyone a few days ahead of the next meeting with the goal of preparing answers/comments that can be collectively reviewed at the next meeting. Let's get to the point where we're making decisions by the April meeting. Ms. Carroll suggested that the remainder of today's meeting focus on other electeds for whom there has not yet been much discussion and review.

Brief discussion about Sheriff salary data. Other elements of compensation may include longevity pay; Ms. Carroll will get confirmation on Sheriff's actual salary and longevity pay. "CPI" is consumer price index and can be examined as part of the methodology of determining salary increases. There was consideration of the comparison of Sheriff's salary to the Bellingham Police Chief's salary. The similarities and differences between the two roles were examined briefly. Sheriff Elfo and the Undersheriff may be invited to address the commission.

Ms. Carroll suggested an examination of the Assessor/Treasurer/Auditor positions. The previous methodology was to set compensation to align with the top step of the "old" salary range (prior to the step updates accomplished after the salary study). The comparisons data spreadsheet shows the top (highest) step for unrepresented employees. One concept for consideration is what is an acceptable cost of living increase rate given the rate of inflation and recent price hikes affecting the economy. Ms. Carroll commented on the options for deciding on a COL rate.

County Council members' salaries were raised. Chair Desler provided some clarifications and history on the part-time (1/2 time) salary that is paid to councilmembers, referencing the County Charter that originally set the council salary at 15% of the Executive's salary. Past Salary Commissions have since raised the pay levels up over the years. A brief discussion ensued on various focus areas for establishing those salaries.

6. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Ms. Mertle may be absent for the meeting due to travel; if possible she may call in remotely. Ms. Funston may also be absent as well. A reminder that Chair Desler and Ms. Carroll will be sending out a series of questions for pre-meeting consideration and input.

7. ADJOURN

A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Shaddix, seconded by Mr. Anderson; the vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously 7-0 – meeting adjourned at 6:06 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Suzanne Mildner,  
Executive Boards and Committees Clerk  
Whatcom County