



WHATCOM COUNTY COMMISSION ON SALARIES
FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS
Thursday, March 30, 2023, 4:00 PM
Virtual Meeting

ATTENDANCE:

Members Present: Linda Stone, Dewey Desler, Rebecca Shaddix, Lori Province, Jeremy Irwin; (arrived late), Michael Anderson, Lance Calloway, Vanessa Bonsema

Members Absent: Piper Mertle; Karen Funston

Staff/Guests Present: Stacey Carroll, Facilitator; Satpal Sidhu, County Executive; Bill Elfo, County Sheriff; Eric Richey, Prosecuting Attorney; Steve Oliver, County Treasurer; "observer"

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Commission Chair Dewey Desler at 4:04 pm. Everyone was welcomed.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chair Desler called for a motion to approve the Minutes of 3/16/23. The motion was made by Michael Anderson and seconded by Lori Province. (No vote was taken).

3. NEW COMMISSIONER

Chair Desler recognized and welcomed Vanessa Bonsema who officially joined the commission.

4. PRESENTATION/Q&A WITH EXECUTIVE SIDHU AND SHERIFF ELFO (invited guests)

County Executive Satpal Sidhu addressed the Commission and started by thanking the commissioners for their service. There are some legacy discrepancies and changes are needed however these types of changes take time. The county government is a service industry and we offer services to the citizens. The elected positions are high responsibility jobs and are very impactful in the community. Executive Sidhu has faith in the commission to make decisions which are fair and equitable. He said that he's available to respond to questions about the role of County Executive.

County Sheriff Bill Elfo addressed the commission, noting that he has served for 20 years as Sheriff. He confirmed that he's announced he will not be running for re-election. It's very important that the county attract qualified people as the office of Sheriff is very complicated and comprehensive. The leadership that is on staff now are of the highest caliber men and women. There are some compression issues that he hopes the commission will consider; salary of undersheriff compared to sheriff (highlighted in his correspondence); consider the salary increase of the Bellingham police chief and the differences of staff levels between the two agencies. Also, not mentioned in the written correspondence is the fact that WWU has hired a new police chief, and this person is making a higher salary than Sheriff. He thanked everyone on the commission for the work they are doing.

Ms. Province asked about the issue of compression and asked for further details on this. Sheriff Elfo reiterated that both the COB police chief and the undersheriff draw a higher salary than the Sheriff who is the lead Law Enforcement representative for Whatcom County. This role encompasses a wide array of responsibilities. Executive Sidhu noted he refers to this compression issue as legacy discrepancy. Comparing with other counties may or may not be effective and should not be the only metric used. He briefly addressed the differences of the skill set of a person elected by the people versus a staff person who is required to have the skill set for the job. He acknowledged he doesn't know the solution for how to bridge these gaps.

Mr. Galloway asked Sheriff Elfo if he believed the Sheriff should be paid at a higher rate than the Bellingham Police Chief and if so, what percentage difference might there be? Sheriff Elfo said yes the Sheriff salary should be higher, perhaps 5%-10% would be fair. He complimented the new Police Chief but noted the area that the Sheriff is responsible for is a geographic area that is as large as the State of Delaware. The unincorporated population is larger than any of the individual cities. There is jail and also emergency management – these are issues the Chief doesn't have to deal with directly.

Chair Desler thanked Sheriff Elfo for serving the county with great skill and distinction. He thanked both the Sheriff and County Executive for their input today.

5. PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Richey addressed the commission. He verified that commissioners received the charts that were sent for review. He reiterated that he's asking for a match and some makeup and the chart shows the past salary commissions intent and actions in this regard. The intent has been to match in the past but each attempt fell short. Asking for a more close match, and to partially correct where there is disparity. He wanted to correct some comments that he's heard earlier on and that is that the County Executive is not "in charge" of the whole county. Each elected official is in charge of their elective function. While compression is an issue, where the County Executive salary is concerned note that the Executive sets the salary of his/her own deputy (possibly a conflict of interest?). Respectfully acknowledged the Executive's comments and way of framing the issue.

6. COMMISSIONER DISCUSSION

Ms. Carroll followed up on some items that had been requested earlier. Most of these items were in the agenda packet, ie Snohomish County's report on Prosecutor salary; Whatcom Prosecutor's additional input and additional information on County Executive salary. Chair Desler addressed the unique nature of County Executive position as this is not the common form of administration for most counties in Washington State (where there are 3 county commissioners, for instance), and he noted Snohomish County is a good comparable to consider due to their size and levels of service.

Ms. Carroll went on to note the issue of hiring of Sheriff's deputies has been improved since the last collective bargaining agreement was signed. However there continue to be difficulties in hiring corrections deputies (jail). She spoke also about the numbers of deputies vs. city police officers. Ms. Keeley from HR noted in her communications that the salary for the undersheriff includes longevity pay (7%). Negotiated increases for cost of living for other employee groups: most common is 4% for 2024 and 3% for 2025. Made one correction: elected officials are offered full family medical benefits at no cost to the individual.

Mr. Calloway asked about Snohomish County Sheriff's salary and the data was viewed again. Sheriff Elfo commented he felt the 2022 and even the 2023 increase were too low. This is also true when compared with City Police Chief.

Executive Sidhu said last year a consultant was hired to review the salaries of unrepresented employees. The salary steps were increased and this was one of the reasons there are gaps between second in command and elected. This may take a few years to correct/catch up.

Following a brief break, Chair Desler asked for continued discussion amongst commissioners regarding methodology and decision-making. He hoped all commissioners had had the opportunity to review the memo he sent earlier. The first item reviewed was the Prosecuting Attorney's salary and sample language provided by George Roche, Deputy Prosecutor, was considered. This example clearly tied the Prosecutor's salary to the Superior Court Judge salary. If the commission were to go along with this language it would be a first. Mr. Anderson commented he thought it would make more sense to begin the salary adjustments with the setting of the County Executive salary. Chair Desler noted that the state legislature provides 50% of the value of the Superior Court Judge salary to the county for use in helping cover the cost of the Prosecutor's salary. As for the County Executive salary there is not any similar language in state law to compare and/or link CE salary to others.

The differing fiscal years of State and County was brought up again. Ms. Carroll confirmed that there are no problems with making mid-year adjustments in the HR financial system. Ms. Province said it is her opinion that the County Executive should be the highest salary paid. She noted that the mid-year adjustment scenario changes the formula of how the commission projects for future salaries.

Ms. Bonsema suggests that the commission consider not matching the State calendar but still use the State data. Allow for the 6-month lag and this is possible to do. Chair Desler agreed, saying we wouldn't have a number for the last six-month period we're responsible for but we could decide to go this route in our final adoption of salaries. And the CE salary could be set at a higher rate and be kept there for the two-year period. Mr. Calloway made a motion that the CE salary be based on the current Washington State Superior Court Judge salary and that it is 3% higher and that the PA salary will be set to match the Superior Court Judge salary with the adjustments to be laid out as earlier drafted, with a one-time payment. The motion was seconded by Ms. Province. Chair Desler suggested clarification of wording on the motion. Mr. Calloway re-stated that the intent is that the CE salary be set at 3% over that which is approved for the State Superior Court Judge and further the PA salary will be matched to the Superior Court Judge, as well as \$905.00 per month for the first six months of 2024. Chair Desler asked for comments and discussion. Mr. Anderson agreed with the motion with the exception of the third part (about catch up salary). Chair Desler is not in favor of the motion as it's too complicated. Ms. Province withdrew her second.

Mr. Calloway agreed to withdraw the original motion. He went on to make a new motion that the County Executive salary be set at 3% above the salary set by the Washington State Salary Commission for the Superior Court Judge. Ms. Stone seconded the motion. Clarifying what the timing is for salary increase? Chair Desler said numbers can be brought forward and would be in effect January 1st of each of the two years. The last six months of the two-year period will not have a set number available. Clarification of motion: the salary set for 2024 and the first six months of 2025. Ms. Bronsema is curious of the impacts this change would have on this position insofar as how the calendared increases compare with other employees in various bargaining groups. Chair Desler suggested its not the goal or responsibility of this commission to focus on collective bargaining agreements. A vote was taken.

All in favor: Desler, Anderson, Calloway, Shaddix, Stone, Province; opposed: Irwin, Bonsema. **Motion carried 6-2.**

Mr. Calloway made another motion that the Prosecuting Attorney's salary be set to match the Washington Superior Court Judge as set by the Washington State Salary Commission and that amount is applied for 2024 and the first six months of 2025. Chair Desler asked if it would be easier to adopt the suggested language of George Roche, and Mr. Calloway agreed. The motion is restated as follows: The salary paid to the Prosecuting Attorney shall be equal to the salary paid to Superior Court Judges, including adjustments thereto, as determined by the Washington Citizens' Commission on Salaries for Elected Officials under Article XXVII of the Washington Constitution and chapter 43.03 RCW. The salary adjustments are applied to the salary of the Prosecuting Attorney according to the same schedule as adjustments are applied to the salary of the Superior Court Judges. Seconded by Chair Desler. Mr. Anderson commented he'd support the PA's salary being connected to the County Executive salary (at 3% less than CE). Ms. Stone agreed. Mr. Calloway agreed to make a friendly amendment to his motion to state instead that the Prosecuting Attorney's salary shall be 3% less than that of the County Executive. This would mean we will not adopt the suggested language from Mr. Roche. There being no further discussion, Chair Desler called for a vote on the motion, and the **motion passes unanimously 8-0.**

Mr. Calloway made another motion that the Prosecuting Attorney is to be \$905 per month to be paid in the first six months of 2024 and a catch-up to bring him current. Ms. Stone seconded the motion. Mr. Anderson disagrees and is not in favor of providing additional back pay. Ms. Shaddix asked for clarification on the idea of back pay versus a one-time payment being authorized. Chair Desler commented about the poor precedent this may become if its viewed as a future commission trying to undo or correct what a previous commission had already decided/enacted and he will be voting against it. There being no further discussion a vote was taken. **The motion failed 0-8.**

Chair Desler asked that the discussion move to the subject of salary for the County Sheriff. There was discussion centering on comparisons of the city police chief as well as Snohomish County Sheriff salaries. One suggestion: raise the salary level to 7% over that of the city police chief as suggested by Sheriff Elfo. Mr. Anderson disagreed with that idea. Chair Desler suggested we first identify the dollar amounts that are established for the County Executive and Prosecuting Attorney, and from there go on to identify an appropriate salary level for Sheriff. The numbers were identified and discussion continued.

Chair Desler made a motion that the County Sheriff be set at 3% over the current salary of the Bellingham police chief for 2024 (\$217,000); seconded by Mr. Anderson. Ms. Bonsema made a quick calculation of what 3% less than Prosecuting Attorney salary would be and came up with \$221,416.00. She likes the logic of having the 3% separation between the two (\$217,000 is about 5% difference). Chair Desler withdrew his motion and Mr. Anderson withdrew his second. Mr. Anderson made a new motion that the County Sheriff's salary be set at 3% below the Prosecuting Attorney's salary. Seconded by Ms. Bonsema. A vote was called for and the motion passed unanimously 8-0.

Mr. Calloway requested that Ms. Carroll provide some percentage and ratio differences for the remaining elected positions for consideration at the next meeting. Ms. Carroll reviewed a couple of follow-up items, one being a new data sheet will be provided with updated numbers that were decided on today. There will be proposed figures provided for consideration.

7. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for April 13th, 2023.

8. ADJOURN

A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Shaddix, seconded by Ms. Province; the vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously 8-0 – meeting adjourned at 6:14 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Suzanne Mildner,
Executive Boards and Committees Clerk
Whatcom County