



WHATCOM COUNTY COMMISSION ON SALARIES  
FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS  
Thursday, April 13, 2023, 4:00 PM  
Virtual Meeting

ATTENDANCE:

Members Present: Dewey Desler, Rebecca Shaddix, Lori Province, Jeremy Irwin; Michael Anderson, Lance Calloway, Vanessa Bonsema, Piper Mertle, Karen Funston

Members Absent: Linda Stone

Staff/Guests Present: Stacey Carroll, Facilitator; 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 3/30/23. The motion was made by Ms. Province and seconded by Mr. Calloway. A vote was taken and **the motion passed unanimously 9-0.**

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Desler recognized Mr. Oliver who addressed the commission with a brief comment. He recalled at the last meeting someone suggested to tie everyone's salary to the Superior Court Judge. That structure existed at one time, prior to the creation of the Salary Commission. He's not sure how valid an approach it was. His prior request to be aligned with the Finance Manager makes sense in that both positions are similar and relatable. His request for that alignment still stands.

4. COMMISSIONER DISCUSSION

Ms. Funston was absent at the last meeting and she has questions about the way that the salary decisions were structured. She's in general agreement with the decisions made. However the idea of tying not just Prosecutor salary but all salaries to the Superior Court Judge: she's concerned that this will mean all salaries will require a mid-year adjustment. Isn't this methodology complicating matters more than is necessary (by following the state's fiscal year)? Ms. Bonsema concurred with the idea that the commission needs to be explicit in the language that is used for establishing effective dates of salary and any adjustments.

Chair Desler commented that he had reflected on the decisions from the last meeting and had some reservations now about the way in which the decisions were reached. He does agree that the Prosecuting Attorney position should be aligned with the State's salary for Superior Court Judge but does not think it's in the best interests of the commission to align and adjust all elected salaries to the State's fiscal year. This would be more complicated for the county budget system and HR and might set them up for mistakes being made (in county budget process) which then require fixing later. He believes this methodology exceeds the ability and capacity of this commission, with no reasonable rationale to

do so. Let's continue this discussion today as other elected positions are considered. He would support a refocus on the commission's responsibilities, according to County Charter, to base the elected's salaries on their work and do so based on comparability to others who hold similar positions.

Ms. Bonsema commented that it's possible to consider both methodologies, i.e., comparing work requirements and similar positions in other counties, but also comparing one elected to another as well. The minutes of the last meeting were brought up onscreen for review and Chair Desler asked Ms. Funston to re-state her concerns. Ms. Funston said she was comfortable with the numbers that were decided on but she wasn't comfortable with the methodology used, starting with tying the County Executive salary with the State's salary for Superior Court Judge. One of the issues she's wanting to highlight is that in listening previously to comments from elected officials there is a concern that some are paid less than their subordinates are. One of the ways of the commission addressing this helps to resolve that issue but we need to continue to be thoughtful about all the background information we've reviewed and be sure to address that data and state it clearly in decision statements moving forward. It felt like the previous discussion was somewhat rushed. By rushing we risk there not being clear direction in the future as to what the commission is trying to accomplish. There were additional comments and reflections on what had occurred at the last meeting. The question of the County Executive salary being set as the highest salary arose and it was reiterated that the majority of commission members agreed that that should be the standard, based on the responsibilities and the authority of the County Executive position.

Chair Desler asked Ms. Funston if she felt there needed to be further review of the minutes and motions made from the last meeting. Ms. Funston said no she didn't recommend that there be any further dialogue or changes made to what has transpired. However she believes the methodology for arriving at the salaries will come out in more detail in the final report.

Chair Desler clarified what was previously decided was that the Prosecutor's salary will be set at the Superior Court Judge level, the CE will be set at 103% of that level and the Sheriff will be set at 97% of that level. Ms. Province asked that Ms. Carroll add some explanatory text to the preamble of the report to address this methodology.

The discussion moved on to focus on the other elected officials' salaries, starting with the Assessor, Treasurer and Auditor. Snohomish County comparable salaries were reviewed. Chair Desler supports that comparison since Snohomish is similar to Whatcom in many ways including Executive/Council form of government. Comparisons to state commission salaries were also reviewed. Discussion continued on current and comparable salaries for these positions. Alternative calculation methodologies were also considered.

Ms. Bonsema made a **motion to set the Treasurer, Assessor and Auditor salaries at 68% of the County Executive's salary**; the motion was seconded by Mr. Calloway. There was some discussion. Clarification on the motion is that the new salary change would take effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024. Ms. Funston doesn't support the motion due to the fact that the salary of the Treasurer would not bring it up to the level of the Finance Manager and she believes that's an important factor. There was a vote on the motion; **motion fails 4-5**.

Ms. Funston made a **motion that the three positions of Treasurer, Assessor and Auditor be set at 71% of the County Executive's salary beginning January 1 2024 and on July 1<sup>st</sup> be adjusted to align**

**with CE salary adjustment**; motion seconded by Ms. Bonsema. There was a vote on the motion; **motion carried 7-2 (Anderson and Desler opposed)**.

The commission moved on to consider salaries of the county councilmembers. Comparisons to Bellingham City Council members were brought up and Mr. Calloway showed some calculations he had made to increase these salaries by about 32-35%. Mr. Calloway made a **motion that the county councilmembers salaries be set at 32.5% of the County Executive salary commencing January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024 and during the period 2024 and 2025**; motion seconded by Mr. Irwin. Some discussion followed, including a comment regarding State legislator salaries. A vote was taken; motion carried 7-2 (Anderson and Desler opposed).

5. REPORT LOGISTICS

The draft final report will be drafted by Ms. Carroll and then sent to the commission members for review. She asked that everyone consider the underlying intentions as well as the numbers that were decided on. She'll try to get that sent out very soon. All comments due back by April 24<sup>th</sup>. A final report will be sent for DocuSign signature by the 25<sup>th</sup>. And from there we'll arrange to get the information to the county. Chair Desler thanked everyone for their active participation in the business of the commission.

6. ADJOURN

A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Shaddix, seconded by Mr. Calloway; the vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously 9-0 – meeting adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Suzanne Mildner,  
Executive Boards and Committees Clerk  
Whatcom County