

Holly C. Lytle

From: Alberto Halpern
Sent: Friday, August 19, 2016 3:36 PM
To: David Stout
Subject: draft response to emails

Thank you for contacting my office recently regarding salary increases for County Commissioners and the County Judge. It is important to me to hear from constituents on issues affecting our community, and I appreciate you taking the time to contact me.

I completely understand your concern on this matter, so please allow me to explain my thinking and motivations behind this difficult decision.

The County of El Paso is in the middle of a seven-year reclassification plan for all County employees to keep up with evolving duties and responsibilities of certain positions and to keep up with current market average salaries. For many County employees and elected officials, salaries have been well below the market average level and the County's efforts over the past few years have been towards raising employees' salaries to be commensurate with job responsibilities.

As part of that effort, County employees received a 2 percent cost of living adjustment (COLA) in 2012, a 1.7 percent COLA in 2013, a 2 percent COLA in 2014, a 3 percent COLA in 2015, and a 4 percent COLA in 2016. In addition, employees received a 2.5 percent STEP increase in 2013 and 2014, along with a 4 percent wage increase for general service employees in 2016 and a 2.5 percent wage increase for professional service employees, again in 2016.

Last year, the Commissioners Court approved a \$10 minimum wage for County and University Medical Center (UMC) employees, to provide a floor for a living wage for our lowest paid employees.

And last week, the Commissioners Court approved a 2.5 percent STEP increase for all County employees for the upcoming fiscal year and a \$14,352 salary increase for our Constables, who are peace officers.

Added to that are the salary increases for County Commissioners and the County Judge positions.

All of the above actions have been done to retain our best and brightest employees, to recruit well-qualified people for new or vacant positions, and to attract equally qualified candidates for elected positions. After all, the Commissioners Court oversees the County's budget, UMC and El Paso Children's Hospital's budget, and the budgets for two Emergency Service Districts, all of which total nearly \$1 billion in public funds.

In terms of the County Commissioners and County Judge salary increases, those positions are currently at 70 percent below the current market average for the same positions across the state of Texas. That is why we made the difficult decision to raise salaries. For far too long, previous Commissioners Courts have not acted on increasing salaries for their positions because these are, admittedly, poor political decisions. I do not take my votes lightly and I certainly don't take them based on political strategy. If I did, I would have resoundingly opposed salary increases, as that would have been the politically expedient thing to do. I supported all of the above salary increases because I care about the future of the County as an institution and as a community. When salaries – across the board – fail to meet the market average or competitive rates elsewhere in the County, we all run the risk of losing the best and most qualified employees and candidates, which erodes

public and customer service, the administration of justice, and public policy decisions that impact the hundreds of thousands of El Paso County residents.

Under the Texas state Constitution and state laws, only the Commissioners Courts in each of the 254 Texas counties make the final decision on salaries. The state Constitution, nor state laws, provide for a public vote on those measures.

In addition, these salary increases are likely not going to impact the tax payer, as we aim to not raise the County tax rate for the next fiscal year. The County has also maintained an effort to save money over the past few years. Those efforts include a \$6.55 million savings by refinancing debt; a \$20 million cost avoidance after CLEAT contract negotiations; an annual \$300,000 savings in lease payments by moving County departments into annexes in various locations; and a \$2.5 million savings by moving our Sheriff's Department to 12-hour shifts in our County jails.

Attached to this email is a more detailed explanation and breakdown of figures that County Judge Veronica Escobar has shared with the public. I highly encourage you to take the time to review the document and the figures detailed in it.

Again, I appreciate the time you took to share your opinions with me. Please continue to keep me informed of the issues of importance to you and your family. If there is any way I can help you with any other County matter, please do not hesitate to call my office.

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