

Holly C. Lytle

From: Veronica Escobar
Sent: Monday, August 22, 2016 9:33 AM
To: Melissa M. Carrillo (Human Resources); Betsy C. Keller; Wallace Hardgrove
Subject: RE: editorial about the salary increases

Thanks, Melissa. There may be a member or two of the court who might want to discuss this considering the points made in the editorial.

-----Original Message-----

From: Melissa M. Carrillo (Human Resources)
Sent: Monday, August 22, 2016 8:55 AM
To: Veronica Escobar; Betsy C. Keller; Wallace Hardgrove
Subject: RE: editorial about the salary increases

Thank you Judge.

My office is working on some comparable stats now on both holidays and retirement....as well as our benefits. We should have this information to share with the Court at tomorrow's budget hearings....

We are confident that our holiday schedule and retirement will also be competitive as well.

-Melissa

-----Original Message-----

From: Veronica Escobar
Sent: Monday, August 22, 2016 8:31 AM
To: Betsy C. Keller; Melissa M. Carrillo (Human Resources); Wallace Hardgrove
Subject: editorial about the salary increases

In case you missed yesterday's editorial, I wanted you to see it, FYI:

<http://www.elpasotimes.com/story/opinion/editorials/2016/08/21/editorial-closer-look-county-raises-needed/89072934/>

Editorial: Closer look at county raises needed Editorial Board, El Paso Times 8:07 a.m. MDT August 21, 2016

Conversations about pay for public officials are fraught with emotion. Many voters recoil at the thought of paying more to their elected representatives, as is now the case with the proposal to raise pay for the county judge and commissioners.

But what is lost in the near-automatic "ick" reaction to elected officials voting to raise their own pay is that the county is in the midst of executing a very smart plan to recruit and retain quality employees throughout the organization.

We believe there is a strong case for raising compensation for the county judge and county commissioners as part of a broader effort with the county government workforce, but we urge the Commissioners Court to look at total compensation packages, not just salary, in its market-based approach.

Since 2012, Commissioners Court has taken a more systematic approach to setting wages for employees, including increasing its minimum wage to \$11 an hour. The proposed raises for the county judge and commissioners – \$14,422

and \$26,569, respectively – were arrived at using the same market-driven approach used for all other county employees.

The deliberate approach to wages is one example of how much better this Commissioners Court has been than past county leadership.

And it can't be stressed enough that the county is keeping property taxes flat for a second consecutive year. That reflects the strong fiscal leadership provided by County Judge Veronica Escobar and commissioners Carlos Leon, Vince Perez, David Stout and Andrew Haggerty.

Commissioners Court also has provided the public ample time to discuss the pay raises, which are part of a county budget that will be considered later this month. That transparency is in stark contrast to the El Paso City Council, which approved a \$61,000 pay raise last year for City Manager Tommy Gonzalez without ever informing El Pasoans that the idea was under consideration.

A frequent objection to the raises is that county officials shouldn't be able to vote to raise their own pay. But Texas law requires the elected commissioners courts to set county salaries, including their own.

The proposed salaries – \$102,000 for the judge and \$89,250 for commissioners – are pegged at 70 percent of the median salary for similar positions in other large Texas counties. El Paso will still have the lowest-paid county judge and commissioners among large urban Texas counties, including Hidalgo County on the border.

El Paso County commissioners currently make less than other county elected officials such as the tax assessor-collector, county clerk, district clerk and justices of the peace, even though their responsibilities are much greater.

It is understandable that many El Pasoans recoil from paying elected officials salaries well above what a typical household makes. But here's a truth we must confront: El Paso has long paid its elected officials relatively low salaries. And we've paid a price for that.

Decades of poor governance and corruption have plagued local government, which can be blamed in part on those low salaries.

Low salaries are unlikely to attract mid-career professionals with the education and skills that make for effective leaders. Instead, they have attracted lesser-qualified candidates including, in some cases, people who sought elected office as a means of making money through illicit means.

So there's a strong case for a pay raise for the judge and county commissioners. But we encourage the Commissioners Court to look at a couple of other factors before making a final decision on the raises.

Salary is only one part of a compensation package. Benefits such as paid time off, health care and retirement also are important, and must be included when looking at compensation.

The county, for example, gives employees 18 paid holidays a year, a number well above that given by most private-sector employers and other governments. The number of holidays was increased several years ago to offset stagnant or reduced wages after the 2008 economic collapse.

But as wages go up, the county should reduce the number of paid holidays. That hasn't been part of the budget discussions.

The county also has a very generous retirement plan, something Perez has brought up repeatedly. Employees contribute 7 percent of their pay, and the county provides a \$2.50 match for every \$1 contributed by the employee.

We encourage Commissioners Court to take a deeper look at total compensation before adopting the budget this month.

The current Commissioners Court has vastly improved the performance of county government. They have kept taxes flat for consecutive years, a rarity for an El Paso government.

They have laid out a good case for a pay increase for top elected officials, but they need to take a closer look at total compensation, not just pay.

Veronica Escobar
El Paso County Judge
500 E. San Antonio, Suite 301 / El Paso, Texas 79901
915.546.2098 voice / 915.543.3888 fax
www.epcounty.com