

# Commissioners defend decision to give cost of living raises

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<http://www.currypilot.com/News/Local-News/Commissioners-defend-decision-to-give-cost-of-living-raises>

County Commissioner David Brock Smith declared “asinine” the rumors that the board’s decision earlier this month to grant cost of living adjustments (COLAs) and retirement benefit (PERS) reimbursements to all county employees — including themselves — will jeopardize September’s jail levy.

Three issues are entangled in the debacle, including the COLAs and PERS reimbursements commissioners granted; the fact Sheriff John Bishop abruptly resigned July 4; and the Sept. 16 property tax increase proposal.

Commissioners indicated during a regular meeting Wednesday they don’t see the correlation between the three, despite outcry in the community about the board’s decision to give 2.8 percent COLAs and 6.4 percent pay increases to reimburse all employees for paying their share toward their retirement pensions — on top of asking voters for a tax hike. For many, Bishop’s resignation announcement was the last straw.

Commissioner Susan Brown voted for the COLAs and PERS reimbursement, but declined to take either in her own salary.

The jail levy asks voters to approve a property tax increase of 68 cents per \$1,000 valuation; the \$1.6 million it would generate would go solely to jail operations.

While many voters say they support Bishop, many others say they are angry at commissioners for their failure to solve the county’s financial woes and their persistence in only offering tax hikes — and not commissioner pay cuts, for one — as the only way to get the county out of its fiscal problems.

The county has made deep cuts in all departments and spun off four departments to nonprofits. Commissioners argue that they work hard for their salaries — and deserve much more, citing a county compensation board committee analysis that evaluates public pay rates throughout the state to compare them locally.

Smith and Commissioner David Itzen defended the COLAs and PERS changes, saying they are not raises, but compensation to make up for years of inflation eating away at employee paychecks.

“This is not a raise,” Smith said. “Milk costs more in the store, gas is more on the roads, and now there’s this huge heartburn about the commissioners voting themselves a raise? (For commissioners) this is a 92-cent per hour raise — \$1,800 a year.

“And I’m going to donate my increased contribution to Pennies for Pooches, to scholarship funds, to the Rotary polio (eradication efforts) and CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates).”

That’s exactly the point voters are trying to make. Many say the commissioners just “don’t get it.”

Citizens, too, have to pay those higher milk and gas prices, and most of them don’t make near the money commissioners do, citizens argue. Few have seen COLAs and fewer yet, raises, in recent years. It’s more common to hear of pay cuts and benefit losses in the private sector.

## Here to there

Smith outlined point by point how commissioners arrived at the decision to give all employees the COLAs and reimburse them for their previously county-paid share of PERS.

It started when the Teamster’s union, which represents law enforcement, negotiated with the county for a 2.8 percent raise, which the board felt wasn’t equitable to non-union employees.

“Salary schedules must stay uniform,” Smith said. “That’s why I believe the vote was unanimous (on COLAs and PERS) And these (raises) are thousands — thousands — less than what the compensation board recommended over the past two years.”

The compensation board said each commissioner should receive about \$10,000 more a year in salary but, with the county in such dire financial straits, those involved realize that is not feasible. Elected officials here are among the lowest paid in the state.

Then, Smith said, he’s been hearing from citizens for years that county employees should pay for their share of their own PERS benefits — 6 percent — which the county has been paying since 2001. Smith brought that to the board’s attention — along with a proposal to reimburse employees 6.4 percent to cover the cost of having to pay their share of benefits. The .4 percent increase is to make up for tax-related costs.

“The public was saying the county staff doesn’t have skin in the game if they’re not paying for their portion of retirement,” Smith said. “That’s what we heard from the public: that there is no skin in the game.”

The budget committee in May agreed to both proposals, and in the budget approval process at the commissioner level — and on the last day of the fiscal year — the board separated the COLAs and PERS increases from the budget and voted on all three separately. All were approved unanimously.

“We wanted to be as transparent as possible so the people understand what we were doing,” Smith said of removing the COLAs and PERS proposals from the budget and voting on them individually. “And here we are with the citizens, discussing COLA increases again.”

### **COLAs: \$52,000**

Wednesday, Itzen downplayed the ramifications of the COLAs being doled out, saying they will total about \$52,000 this year for all county employees.

“If you think in terms of going over the (fiscal) cliff, in roughly a year from today, we’re only going over the cliff four days earlier,” he said. “That’s insignificant. What’s significant to the employees is that they haven’t been able to keep up with inflation. This was an attempt to make up for lost time.”

He also criticized Pilot Editor Scott Graves, with whom he spoke last week about the raises, community perception and the September levy question. He noted that Graves doesn’t understand why county commissioners took the COLAs and PERS reimbursement.

“It’s wrong not to take it,” Itzen said. “But I think (Graves’) viewpoint is very, very wrong. He didn’t ask the right questions. He didn’t ask where I was going to spend my COLA. I’m going to donate it to veterans and Harbor Fire.”

The COLAs and PERS reimbursements went into effect July 1, the first day of the 2014-2015 fiscal year.