

County's COLA decision may have unintended impacts

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Sheriff John Bishop doesn't think the county commissioner's giving all employees — themselves included — a cost of living adjustment (COLA) and retirement reimbursement pay should affect voters' opinions regarding the jail tax measure Sept. 16.

He had nothing to do with the commissioner's decision Monday, he noted. And the two issues aren't even related.

"I don't get a vote — I wasn't even in town," he said. "I didn't even know. I knew we were going to have a 2.8 percent increase for the union. There was some talk about it being across the board. But I had no idea if they were doing it for themselves, or if elected officials would get it.

"When I was negotiating, I was negotiating for the Teamster contract," he added. "At no time was I negotiating for the county. Whatever else happened, happened, but I was not involved."

Bishop wholeheartedly supported — and negotiated with union officials to get — a 2.8 percent COLA and 6.4 percent reimbursement for their retirement for his employees. But he said he didn't know county commissioners would extend it to everyone, as they did when they approved the 2014-2015 budget.

He said he would have supported the COLA and PERS adjustments — if he had a say in the matter — for the same reasons county commissioners cited earlier this week: employees haven't received even a COLA since 2009, the total amount of the expense is relatively small, and if employees aren't given periodic raises, they leave and the county cannot afford that at this time.

"Other than it affecting my jail levy, I get it," he said. "My people deserve the 2.8 percent. I negotiated for my people, not for the commissioners, not for across the board. And it doesn't matter what I think anyway. I don't get a vote."

The board's actions, however, could backfire on him, even though the two issues — increases to employee pay and the jail levy — are separate issues.

Voters will be asked this fall to approve a property tax increase of 68 cents per \$1,000 assessed valuation; the \$1.6 million it would generate would go to fund jail operations.

Commissioners also approved taking an additional \$400,000 from the road fund to pay for road deputies.

If voters approve the tax measure, it would “free up” \$1.2 million currently allocated from the general fund for the sheriff’s department, for use in other county operations.

Commissioners have cut expenses at the county, and have had two property tax measures fail at the polls. So giving themselves what people perceive as a raise when times are tight, has made more than a few a bit more than mad.

The community

Some residents see it as a matter of principle.

“We realize Bishop needs something; we understand,” Linda Gunderson of Brookings told the Pilot after posting comments on Facebook. “But to see this come through? If they were mindful, they’d give their \$60,000 to Bishop and let him use it in his jail. They are lining their own pockets with this one. I am not happy with this one, and neither are my friends. We are livid. Bishop may not get a dime.”

Sharon Kay Allen of Brookings said she no longer planned to vote on behalf of Bishop’s property tax.

“(This shows us) the county must not be as broke as they try to make us believe; otherwise they would not have the money to give themselves a raise,” she said. “How can we trust them? If the levy fails again the commission’s sneaky actions might be one of the reasons why. The timing was not right for this. What in the world were they thinking?”

Others who called the Pilot Wednesday expressed the same opinion. Some declined to identify themselves, citing fear of retribution, as friends work for the county.

“It might be easier to accept a COLA for county employees, had the commissioners foregone their increases,” said Pam Niles. “Possibly. Those commissioners had no business increasing their salaries — it was a real slap in the face to the rest of us. I don’t care how they spin it, it feels that way.”

“I give kudos to Susan Brown” said Maureen Ter Beek of Brookings. “It’s the kind of culture you see in the military: the leaders of troops don’t eat until the troops are fed. That builds loyalty; that’s the leadership that is in their culture. That’s obviously not in this public service culture, in terms of our comish. One commissioner has stated we’re all on the same team; we’re not all on the same team — he’s leading the team. What do leaders do? They set the tone. Susan Brown has set the tone.”

If the levy fails, the county has few options to get the county’s finances out of a bad situation. The commissioners are testing a variety of ideas to diversify the local economy, including work in the forest, implementing business license fees and a lodging tax, attracting new business to the county and completing the redundant Internet line.

And they could always fall back on the state to come in and operate the county, which all elected leaders in the county are trying to avoid.

The commissioners' decision Monday might not just affect the jail levy: notably it might hurt David Itzen, who is up for reelection against Harbor resident Tom Huxley in the November general election.

"We've got to do something; this cannot continue," Gunderson said. "This is huge — absolutely jaw-dropping, at a time when we are in such fiscal trouble. And Itzen: That's 10 votes I know he's not getting this time. I will make sure every person I know, knows. If this is how far out of touch you are with the people of Brookings, you do not deserve to be commissioner."

"We know our public servants work very hard, and we would love to give them a raise — under normal circumstances," Ter Beek said. "And I understand commissioners had to take a 3 percent (salary) cut (in 2011), and while that's unfortunate, it hardly compares with the compression in salaries that has taken place — 50 percent in some cases — in the private sector.

"We personally know people employed in the private sector, right here in Brookings, who know they should be saving for retirement but they simply cannot afford to," she added. "This is the world we're living in right now. We cannot give people COLAs, and PERs contributions. Times really are tough."