

County workers, officials get pay increase

Written by Jane Stebbins, Pilot staff writer

ASIDE FROM UNFOUNDED "OPINIONS" & BS, THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS AN EXTRAORDINARY NUMBER OF LIES WHICH THIS SLIPSHOD NEWS PUBLICATION HAS ONCE AGAIN NOT VETTED.

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Curry County commissioners agreed Monday — the day before changes the 2014-2015 fiscal year — to grant a 2.8 percent Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) increase to county employees and elected officials, including themselves.

Additionally, the board agreed to end its practice of paying for county employees' share of their retirement — 6 percent of pay — and then approved the budget committee's recommendation to increase employee's pay by 6.4 percent to offset their having to pay it themselves. The additional .4 percent addresses pre-tax issues of government employees.

The actions were part of this year's budget approval.

Commissioner Susan Brown, however, said on Tuesday that she will not take the 2.8 percent COLA, nor the 6.4 percent reimbursement to pay for her retirement benefits, called PERS.

"I turned down the 6.4 and I'm turning down the 2.8, and I'm paying my share of PERS," she said. "It's inappropriate. It was appropriate and right for the employees; it was the right thing to do. I don't have a problem with that."

She doesn't know if her fellow commissioners knew she went to County Attorney Jerry Herbage and told him she didn't want the salary increases. She will now see a reduction in her gross pay.

Yet, she agrees with the other commissioners that employees need to be compensated.

"It needed to be done," Brown said. "You can only ask so much of the people working for you. If we could do more to catch up with what they've lost over the years, we would, but we can't. This is the best we can do. I'm good with that."

COLA and PERS

The decisions to give county employees PERS reimbursements and COLAs were addressed separately from the 2014-2015 budget to "show voters how transparent county commissioners want to be about the issue," said Commissioner David Brock Smith.

The decision was based on the recommendation from the county Budget Committee.

"John Spicer (budget committee member) said it best," Smith said. "He said, 'You can no longer put the financial burden of the county on the backs of its employees.'"

Monday's decision was somewhat driven by union negotiations that garnered its members a 2.8 percent raise. County commissioners last month agreed it's only fair to give all others the same pay increase in the form of a COLA.

LIE #1: Smith repeatedly said the 2.8 percent increase is not a raise for such things as tenure or performance, but a COLA is long overdue for county employees who haven't seen a pay increase since 2009.

LIE #2: "Yet, if you look at inflation, the (cost of living) increases, minimum wage has increased, Social Security — there have been other increases upward of 12 to 15 percent," Smith said.

LIE #3: The money, said County Commissioner David Itzen, will come from the general fund — and will only make up for what employees have lost to inflation over the years.

Money is being taken from reserve funds to pay for county operations, and is expected to run out next June. The total monetary amount of the COLAs is so insignificant it would only bring the county one day closer to having no money at all, Itzen said.

Teamwork

Smith and Itzen agree that county employees — from the just-hired to county commissioners — are a team, so the pay adjustments should be given to all.

"Everybody gets treated the same because we're all part of the same team," Itzen said. "That includes management, as well. If you don't take care of everyone, you lose in the end."

He thinks the idea that commissioners should have exempted themselves from the allocations is a "red herring."

"They're mad today about that, they'll be mad tomorrow about something else," Itzen said of critics. "It's a diversion. Why would you want to take the one thing you left — the employees — and force them out? I'm not going to do that. I'm going to keep them whole as much as possible."

County officials in 2001 agreed to pay its employees' share of retirement funds because it was deemed less expensive than giving raises every year.

"I wanted to change that," Smith said. "A lot of citizens talked to me over the years, saying the county employees should pay their portion of PERS."

That issue was also negotiated with the Teamsters; the union signed off on it and brought it to the budget committee, which unanimously agreed to recommend both the COLA and the change in PERS as part of this year's budget, he said. County commissioners then extended that to the rest of county employees.

"It needs to be understood that the commissioners voted on this on the recommendation of the budget committee," Smith said. "And we specifically separated them out (COLA and PERS) to vote on them separately. We wanted to be clear and transparent and out in the open for those who are following budget committee meetings."

LIE #4: The county began spinning off entire departments into nonprofit organizations two years ago to save money. Part of those savings were realized in that the county no longer had to pay for PERS for the employees who now work with the nonprofit.

Between layoffs, retirements and positions going unfilled, what's left of the county staff — about 100 employees — is overworked, most agree.

All the more reason for the COLA, Smith said.

“We have a very small staff these days, compared to what it was before,” he said. “Our employees are doing more with less. And we’re losing good people — the juvenile director, the sanitarian. ...”

Outcry

Many on Facebook’s local social blog, Curry/Del Norte Chitter Chatter, were livid when news got around about the perceived salary increase. Some said they understand giving county employees raises — and possibly even elected department heads — but were infuriated that commissioners opted to give themselves what they perceive as a raise.

It brings each commissioner’s base pay from \$60,000 to \$66,648.

LIE #5: “This is not a raise; it’s a cost of living adjustment,” Smith said. “Did Social Security get a coat of living adjustment this year? Last year? The year before that and the year before that? Employees here at the county haven’t. At what point do you start to lose core people?”

Itzen agreed.

LIE #6: “The fact of the matter is, we’re the same team,” he said. “These employees have not had a raise since 2009; inflation is eating them alive.”

Tom Huxley, who is pitted against Itzen in November’s election, said he is also concerned about other expenses that aren’t as apparent when reading the order for the COLAs and PERS, but are outlined in Monday’s agenda packet.

By giving employees the money the county usually paid for PERS, Huxley said, an employee’s gross salary jumps considerably. And PERS, like Social Security, determines the amount of a pension based on the last three years of a person’s pay.

“We have no control over it,” Huxley said. “They are not of the opinion that they are accountable to the citizens. It should concern the people. There’s nothing you can do about it, nothing I can do about it, with the makeup of this current board. Period.”

Other budget items

Another facet of the budget promotes Economic Development Director Pamela Dickson and allocates funds for a second person to assist her and office administrator Terri Perez. Both work under the auspices of the commissioner’s office.

Other elements of the order approved Monday indicate some employees will receive “STEP” pay increases — promotions in rank — that add up to about a 5 percent salary increase.

LIE #7: The board considers such increases every three years. It’s only fair, Smith argues, as commissioners took a 3 percent pay cut in 2011.

“It’s a fact,” he said. “It needs to be reported as a fact.”

He also cites that the Elected Officials Compensation Board, mandated by the state, “recommended a heck of a lot more than 3 percent (raise for commissioners),” he said. That board, comprised of Al Wilson, Norma Fitzgerald and Sue Musser, recommended county commissioners receive a \$10,000 pay increase after they researched other public and private entities that employ people in similar positions. That board, however, also acknowledged that, under the county’s current financial situation, doing so would probably not be prudent.

Itzen and Smith both cite that Brookings and Gold Beach pay their employees more.

“This is not the board of commissioners trying to feather their own nest,” Smith said. “I will argue as long the day is long for remuneration for the hard-working staff we have. This is what it takes for them to get the job done for our citizens.”

Backlash and the jail

LIE #8: Itzen believes the COLA and PERS increases will not affect voters when they go to the polls Sept. 16 to cast ballots regarding a proposed property tax increase of 68 cents per \$1,000 to fund the jail. That would raise \$1.2 million that usually comes out of the general fund, so the county would have those general fund monies available for other county operations.

LIE #9: “I don’t think it’ll have any effect,” Itzen said. “And I don’t understand that kind of thinking. Our goal is to keep our core of the best employees in county. If our pay is the lowest in the state, we’re not going to be able to keep them.”

“This is really defensible,” he continued. “It is much cheaper to pay experienced people than it is to recruit, with the constant turnover. Mistakes get made, and in the jail, mistakes can be very serious things. They can be dangerous.”

Sheriff John Bishop could not be reached for comment.

Giving everyone COLAs and PERS reimbursements is only part of the solution to the county’s fiscal woes, Itzen said.

“The pay is one, the jail is second, and there will be many more pieces of this puzzle to follow,” he said “My concern is that we’re not moving fast enough to retain our employees.”

“I worry,” he added. “I think we’re going to continue to lose good people, and it’ll be tragic for our community. We’ve got some good stuff going; the problem is, can we last long enough?”