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Grand jury questions East Bay elected leaders' compensation

By Lisa P. White
Contra Costa Times

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Richmond, San Ramon and Martinez spent the most on council members' salaries and benefits, according to a new report by the Contra Costa Civil grand jury that outlines significant compensation differences, even among cities of similar size.

"Elected Board Membership: Public Service or Public Employment?" details the total compensation -- which may include salaries, meeting stipends, health insurance, pensions, life insurance and other perks -- Contra Costa County cities and special districts gave elected officials in the 12-month period ending in June 2010. The grand jury collected the data through surveys of the agencies.

Among the eight cities that exceeded the \$77,895 average, Richmond spent \$267,139; San Ramon spent

\$163,190 and Martinez spent \$131,326. Richmond has a full-time mayor and six council members; Martinez and San Ramon have five.

Of the 12 cities that pay for council members' health insurance, Martinez spent \$71,416, more than any other city, the report shows. But Martinez leaders think salary and benefits information for the city clerk and treasurer may have been included in the grand jury data.

The grand jury notes that although the compensation council members and board directors receive is small change compared to the overall budgets, agencies have cut staff and slashed services in recent years to close deficits.

"Although service reductions have been implemented, governing boards have continued to enjoy the same level

of benefits," the report says. "They should demonstrate their leadership by eliminating or reducing benefits."

The grand jury recommends that, each year, cities and special districts publicly review the compensation they provide and consider cuts.

"We thought the public should know that some of these entities are paying for life insurance; is that appropriate? Some are paying for cell phones and Internet access," said forewoman Linda Chew. "We're not saying it's wrong, we're not saying it's illegal. We're just raising the question."

According to data provided to the Bay Area News Group for calendar year 2010, Martinez paid \$16,415 for Mayor Rob Schroder's health insurance, \$14,259 for Councilman Mark Ross and \$7,199 for Councilwoman Lara DeLaney. Council members Janet Kennedy and Mike Menesini each took cash payments of \$8,672 in lieu of health coverage.

Schroder believes their compensation is appropriate, as council members often put in long hours for a part-time annual salary of \$7,020.

"Obviously, Martinez is not the third largest city in the county but I don't know if you can make those assumptions that it's all by population," said Schroder, who is self-employed.

But Martinez leaders find themselves in a tough spot. The city has an \$800,000 budget deficit and the city manager has said employee concessions will be on the table during contract negotiations

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too.

"I don't want anything more lucrative, anything more enhanced than what the rank-and-file employees get," he said.

Richmond council members compare their salaries and health care benefits with other cities' as part of an annual budget review, Mayor Gayle McLaughlin said.

"Elected officials on the Richmond City Council earn so little, there really isn't much to say," McLaughlin said. With an annual salary of \$16,830, the six part-time Richmond council members are Contra Costa's highest paid.

Kris Hunt, executive director of the Contra Costa Taxpayers Association, said it's excessive for cities to provide health and life insurance coverage for what are essentially volunteer positions.

"This is not a job; it's something that they elected to run for, and the bottom line is we can't afford it," Hunt said.

The grand jury report shows compensation costs vary widely, even among cities of similar size. Oakley and Martinez both have about 35,000 residents, but Oakley spent \$28,544 on council compensation, compared to \$131,326 in Martinez, according to the report. Oakley council members are paid \$5,300 but receive no health or retirement benefits.

"We've always just considered it a privilege and a duty instead of employment," said Oakley Mayor Jim Frazier, who said he donates half his salary to Oakley's library. Years ago, when some Oakley council members participated in the city's health care plan, they footed the entire bill, Frazier added.

City size and job complexities figure into the amount of compensation, Antioch City Manager Jim Jakel said. Antioch leaders, for example, have to deal with water rights issues, sewer water collection, a municipal marina and a redevelopment agency, along with a larger group of engaged residents, he said.

Lafayette, Orinda and Moraga keep a tight hold on the purse strings -- their council members are unpaid.

council candidates, " 'Why would you run for this job? It's hard and it involves a lot of late nights and sometimes brokering agreements between angry people.' The phrase that I hear most often is, 'I wanted to give something back to the community.' "

San Ramon council members earned about \$15,000 and the mayor pocketed about \$17,834 in 2010, according to Bay Area News Group data.

San Ramon Mayor Abram Wilson said it's unfair to compare compensation because each city is unique.

"I love Pittsburg, but it's a different city than San Ramon," said Wilson, adding that his city has about 72,000 people, a large business park and the growing Dougherty Valley.

"I'm very fortunate that I have the ability to do this and give back to my city," Wilson said. "I consider myself a volunteer. To make a positive difference, to me that is the most important thing."

The 27 special districts that provide fire protection, water, wastewater treatment and other services spent an average of \$34,784 on total compensation for board members, according to the report. Of the nine districts that spent the most, eight are water or wastewater providers, that pass costs along to ratepayers, the grand jury noted.

The West County Wastewater District, which serves San Pablo, parts of Pinole and Richmond and other unincorporated areas, tops the list with \$175,254 in total compensation, including \$44,823 for health

Costa Sanitary District spent \$158,174; and the Byron Bethany Irrigation District, which serves parts of Contra Costa, Alameda and San Joaquin counties, spent \$105,380, including \$99,684 for health insurance, according to the report.

But Byron Bethany General Manager Rick Gilmore said the report is misleading because it lists the district's population as 3,000 when it actually serves 60,000 people. Chew said the grand jury took the population figures from the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission.

The irrigation district also has nine board members and the other districts have five, he said; although the grand jury report notes that two positions are vacant.

Staff writers Paul Burgarino, Roman Gokhman, Jonathan Morales, Rowena Coetsee, Sophia Kazmi and Katherine Tam contributed to this report. Lisa P. White covers Martinez and Pleasant Hill. Contact her at 925-943-8011. Follow her at [Twitter.com/lisa_p_white](#).

COUNCIL COMPENSATION EXPENSES 2009-10
A Contra Costa County grand jury report shows cities and towns, even those with similar populations, vary widely in their payments to their council members.

City Population Total cost Salary, meeting fees
Health payments

Richmond	102,186	\$267,139	\$152,130	\$53,700
San Ramon	59,002	\$163,190	\$47,935	\$59,768
Martinez	36,179	\$131,326	\$46,200	\$71,416
Concord	124,780	\$128,262	\$74,580	\$42,303
Antioch	100,150	\$112,591	\$53,746	\$1,922
San Pablo	30,950	\$100,961	\$45,210	\$37,906
Hercules	23,000	\$93,691	\$51,960	\$34,141
Brentwood	50,614	\$91,998	\$34,155	\$42,425
Pleasant Hill	33,377	\$72,206	\$37,950	\$27,541
Walnut Creek	66,000	\$61,798	\$35,100	\$0
Pinole	19,193	\$59,965	\$17,862	\$41,396
Danville	42,601	\$54,958	\$40,064	\$31,764
Pittsburg	63,004	\$40,035	\$33,240	\$5,220
El Cerrito	23,596	\$37,613	\$26,710	\$0
Clayton	10,784	\$29,590	\$23,400	\$0
Oakley	34,000	\$28,544	\$27,924	\$0
Orinda	17,600	\$2,801	\$0	\$0
Moraga	16,800	\$2,673	\$0	\$0
Lafayette	24,500	\$631	\$0	\$0