

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Contra Costa Times editorial: Rein in expense of payments, benefits for elected local officials

Contra Costa Times editorial
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Posted: 05/14/2011 04:00:00 PM PDT

THERE WAS a time when public service in local elected offices was performed with little or no compensation. Unfortunately, that is a phenomenon that has over the years faded into a distant memory as a growing number of city council members and special district officeholders receive increasingly substantial pay and benefits.

A new Contra Costa civil grand jury found that there is a wide disparity in compensation even among cities of similar populations. The payments to local elected officials include salaries, meeting stipends, health insurance, pensions and life insurance.

This study is a disturbing example of what could lead to increasingly higher payments to local officials who should be motivated by a spirit of public service.

It is a study that should be repeated throughout the state and one that should be pursued by an Alameda County grand jury as well.

For 2009-10, the grand jury tabulated an average cost of \$77,895 in various types of compensation for city council members. Richmond led the list with \$267,139 in payments to elected officials, including \$152,130 in salary and meetings, and \$53,700 in health insurance.

Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin defended the high costs of its officials, saying salaries and health benefits are made by comparing them with other cities. If so, why is Richmond paying more than twice as much as Concord, which is 20 percent larger?

Martinez

is near the top of the list, spending \$131,326 on its elected city officials despite facing a budget deficit of \$800,000.

San Ramon paid out \$163,190 in compensation to its city officials, while Pittsburg, a city with a greater population, paid out just \$40,035.

San Ramon Mayor Abram Wilson defended the high payments compared to Pittsburg's, saying that his city is different. That's true, but being a city council member in San Ramon is hardly any more challenging than it is in Pittsburg.

Hercules and Lafayette have about the same population. The former pays \$93,691 to its city council members in salary and benefits while the latter has unpaid council members.

Certainly the quality of leadership has nothing to do with the compensation of city leaders, as a comparison between Lafayette and the troubled city of Hercules demonstrates.

A couple of special districts also are generous in doling out pay and benefits to elected officials. The West County Wastewater District pays \$175,254 to its board members. The Central Contra Costa Sanitary District spent \$158,174 on its elected officials.

The Byron Bethany Irrigation district, which serves parts of Contra Costa, Alameda and San Joaquin counties spent \$105,380 on its elected leaders, almost all of it in health insurance benefits.



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We agree with Kris Hunt, executive director of the Contra Costa Taxpayers Association, who said it is excessive for cities to provide health and life insurance for volunteer positions.

If the trend continues, it is not unreasonable to foresee a time when growing compensation leads to full-salaried elected positions, much as has already occurred at the county level.

Anything more than a nominal stipend for meetings and expenses directly related to service on city councils and special district boards is inappropriate and needs to be reined in.

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