

**WHATCOM COUNTY COMMISSION ON SALARIES
FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS**

MINUTES

MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2021 4:00PM

Virtual Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89927554525?pwd=QXJqMVhMdTgzOC9vcEh1MlcwN3BUdz09>

ATTENDANCE

Members Present: Jill Bernstein, Lance Calloway, Dewey Desler, Jim Farmer, Tracie Gulit, Philip Howell, Karen Peila, Lori Province, Beth Vonnegut, Matthew Williams

Members Absent: None

Staff Present: Kara Turner, Turner HR Consulting and Commission Facilitator, Pat Elwell
Commission Administrative Assistant

Guests: Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney Eric Richey, Whatcom County Treasurer Steve Oliver, Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu

A. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chair Dewey Desler.

B. APPROVAL OF MARCH 1, 2021 MINUTES

The March 1 minutes were reviewed with the following comment:

Commissioner Bernstein noted her comments are fleshed out in the recording. In addition, she felt it was important that the commission ask Whatcom County HR staff to be alert to the possibility of and salary compression occurring when elected officials recommend wage increases for their second-in-command.

Commissioner Vonnegut noted that it was not her intent to recommend tying the Prosecutor's salary to the Superior Court Judge salary; rather, she would like to see this concept discussed by the commission.

Commissioner Gulit clarified that during her comment period her question was not "Why are elected officials paid less than department heads" but rather "Why are elected officials paid less than the private sector." It was noted that the query around the pay differential between elected officials and department heads occurred during general discussion.

Motion was made by Commissioner Bernstein and seconded by Commissioner Calloway to approve the minutes. The Motion passed unanimously.

C. PUBLIC COMMENT

Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney Eric Richey stated the following:

- The legislator did not mandate, but rather recommended the Prosecuting Attorney's salary be tied to the Superior Judge salary

- Provided comment on materials submitted for the commission’s review.
- Described the “supplemental compensation” that was issued in the past by the County Executive without Council action. This practice had been heavily criticized by the Council due to lack of transparency.
- Expressed concern that the Commission receive accurate data.

Whatcom County Treasurer Steve Oliver discussed various government (City of Bellingham, the State of Washington, etc.) revenue forecasts. He noted that a stabilization of revenue is expected and that there were a number of “over dire” predictions related to the pandemic.

Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu, who was invited to participate in the meeting, was introduced to members of the commission. The Executive offered his perspective on how funding local government has changed over the years and whether or not the current method is working well. Based on his research and calculations, the amount of money spent on those conducting government’s business (nation-wide) is miniscule when compared to overall costs. Executive Sidhu offered his opinion that the salary of the Assessor, Auditor, and Treasurer positions are out of balance and requested the commission to look at these positions to bring their compensation in line and to a competitive level.

Discussion followed in which the commission members were able to ask questions of the County Executive. Subjects included public perception of elected wages; county council wages, complexity of work and hours worked; use of percentages in determining base wages; and other issues the commission is considering.

Additional discussion included how the county worked with cities in pooling funds to address needs within the community; cost cutting measures taken by Whatcom County and the county’s planning for the future. It was noted that tax revenue for 2020 was only less by 3% from 2019.

A question was raised related to public and county employee perceptions: should elected officials receive pay increases? The Executive stated the commission’s work is to match skills and responsibilities with compensation; the process is data driven. Treasurer Steve Oliver and Prosecutor Eric Richey cited the importance of public process, transparency and data driven decision-making.

The commissioners continued to discuss compensation, impact of pandemic on wages and revenue, and sustainability of the commission’s decision-making.

Chair Desler presented several possible salary scenarios for elected officials for the commissioners’ consideration. Reference SCD-6. Discussion followed. The Chair requested input from each commissioner. Comments/thoughts included:

- Is there additional data that needs to be considered?
- Elected official salaries need to be set to attract competent people.
- Performance measures should be addressed by the electorate, not the salary commission.
- Can and/or should elected salaries be comparable to private sector salaries?

- Compensation should be tied to comparable duties of other positions.

D. ADDITIONAL DATA TO REVIEW

The following documents were presented for review and discussion:

- SCD-1 – Historical Information Used to Determine Elected Official Salaries
- SCD-2 – Whatcom County Elected Official Salary History with % Increases
- SCD-3 – Elected Official Salary Comparison Summary
- SCD-4 – Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney Comparison
- QAB+3 – Communication from Melisa Kerley, Whatcom County Human Resources, addressing status of negotiations with unions and 2021 & 2022 COLAs

E. DISCUSSION & DRAFT SALARY PROPOSALS

Referencing SCD-6, Elected Officials Possible Salary Scenarios, Chair Desler explained reasoning and analysis behind numbers presented. Discussion followed.

The question was raised whether the current salary for council members was predicated on a part-time 20 hrs/week schedule. What is the relationship between hours worked and compensation? There was general agreement that compensation for council members requires more discussion due to present workload, time requirements, and complications of the position.

The commission reviewed the Assessor/Auditor/Treasurer scenario presented. Some commissioners agreed that compensation for these positions should be comparable to county department heads with a 2022 annual salary of \$133,332, a 5.6% increase. Discussion followed around timing, specifically whether to provide this adjustment at once or over two years. In addition, it was acknowledged that a decision around a COLA for 2023 needs to be discussed. It was proposed that these three positions be treated identically. The commission requested to receive verification from Whatcom County HR staff as to where the \$133,332 figure falls for the IT and HR department head salaries.

The commission reviewed the Sheriff scenario presented. Based on the sheriff's memo, the commission felt no changes were needed at this time. The commission agreed to come back to the COLA issue for 2022 and 2023.

The commission reviewed the County Executive scenario presented. There was general agreement that the County Executive compensation should be slightly more than the Prosecuting Attorney compensation.

The commission reviewed the Prosecuting Attorney scenarios presented and discussed whether there should or should not be a difference in compensation between the Superior Judge and Prosecuting Attorney positions.

The Chair requested commissioners to think about the issues and come prepared to discuss in more detail at the next meeting. The commissioners requested confirmation that the council salary is based on a .50 FTE and to review what is stated in the Charter. Other than this, the commissioners

felt they had enough information to move forward.

F. NEXT STEPS

The next meeting will be Monday, April 5, 2021 at 4:00 PM.

G. ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 6:28PM.

Minutes approved by the Commission in open public meeting on Monday, April 5, 2021.

**Whatcom County Commission on Salaries for Elected Officials
Whatcom County, Washington**

Dewey Desler

**Dewey Desler
Chair**

Attest:

**Patricia F. Elwell
Commission Administrative Assistant**