

Citizens Enjoy Helping Set Commissioner Salaries

by John Haakanson

When the Lane County commissioners asked County Administrator Jim Johnson for assistance in grappling with a politically sensitive issue, he turned to a new source for help: the average voter.

Johnson, who coordinates county operations for the board, had his staff select citizens at random from voter registration rolls to help decide whether to give the commissioners a raise.

The 12 voters ultimately recommended a 28 percent salary increase to \$41,000 for the commissioners, who now earn \$32,032. Any actual raise would have to be approved by the county budget commission and voted on by the commissioners.

The amount recommended was not as important to Johnson as testing an unusual way of involving citizens in local government. The idea came from a planning journal article Johnson clipped and saved about citizen involvement in a Minnesota water rights decision.

What worked in Minnesota appears to have worked in Lane County, judging from comments by the group and county officials. All participants seem pleased with this particular brand of citizen involvement.

"The process proved that the average citizen can receive facts and reach a judgment as well as anyone," Johnson said after the panel completed its work.

There were plenty of facts for the citizens to receive. They met all day October 3 for a crash course on commissioners' responsibilities and the county's \$144 million annual budget.

Lane County Senior Management Analyst Margo Drivas said the staff was pleased with the group's dedication. "They came prepared to work and they worked hard," Drivas said.

Drivas gave the panel an overview

of county government, and "Compensation 101," her term for a short course in how the county pays commissioners and staff. Drivas also reviewed the recent salary history of the board and county staff.

"At first it was very frustrating," said panel member Katherine Lydum of Eugene. "The amount of information was just overwhelming." Lydum, an elementary-school teacher, said the process got smoother as the day went on. She called the county staff "great facilitators."

Sylvia East, a high school economics teacher who lives in Cottage Grove, said it was "nice to be treated respectfully, and given good information."

"If you look at the national things, it's nice to see local government is on its toes," she said, adding that the only flaw in the process was a lack of lead time.

Legal secretary Barbara Garcia feels "it's good for people to be involved and made aware of things they are paying for."

"I feel real good about it and would do it again," said Garcia, who said the hardest part of the process was "trying to think of a figure which would not enrage county citizens."

Management Analyst Bob Wanetick helped educate the panel about what the commissioners do and how much other Oregon counties are paying their elected officials.

Staff asked the citizens to develop their own questions about commissioner duties, and the panel responded by working up a questionnaire which the commissioners answered in writing.

The commissioners also had a dinner meeting with the group for more questions on Tuesday, October 6.

Retired elementary teacher Martin Rebeck of Yachats found the process of learning about the county and mak-

ing a salary recommendation "very enlightening."

"The growth that took place through the education was truly amazing," said Rebeck. "I realize it was an experiment on the administrator's part for coming up gracefully with a way to do something about the salaries."

"They honestly wanted to present an unbiased set of facts about the

situation," said Rebeck.

County staff were careful not to influence the citizens' recommendations if possible, instead presenting information and letting the group decide. At one point in the discussion after the dinner with the commissioners, Administrator Johnson asked the panel to "tell me if you think the staff is leading you to a conclusion."

Members were also asked repeatedly if they needed more information. Most seemed genuinely pleased to be participating, including Glenn Bigelow of Springfield.

"Just because you're John Doe citizen doesn't mean you can't contribute," said Bigelow, speaking at an October 6 evening meeting which followed a dinner with the commissioners. He called the panel "a ray of hope" for Lane County.

The commissioners, who are elected to four-year terms, were naturally happy with the possibility of a salary increase, but were pleased with the process as well.

"The idea goes back to the days of Jefferson," said Commissioner John Ball. "Some residue of wisdom resides throughout the populace."

"These are philosophical underpinnings this country has had faith in for a long time," said Ball, who called the salary problem a "delicate, ticklish subject," that the citizen panel may help resolve.

Commissioner Jerry Rust said the process was "very good, very legitimate. They [citizens] were prepared to learn." He described the \$41,000 proposed salary level as "generous," and said, "I would have a hard time going that high . . . maybe we should take half a bite."

While Rust, Ball and Johnson didn't have any specific ideas for using this citizen panel process in the immediate future, all were inclined to do so if the situation is right. Johnson saw a possible use coming from a current county project aimed at improving delivery of county services.

For example, each department in the county is now reporting to Johnson regarding "who our major clients are," and he said there could be issues that arise from this process which would be appropriate for citizen panels to address.



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