

POLICE COMMISSION CHANGES ITS FOCUS

“What do people like to see in police policies?” asks Kaitlyn Lange, former Eugene Police Commission chair. She says this question, and trying to allow for more flexibility and greater efficiency, led to recent changes in the commission’s work plan, which alterations the commission’s focus from reviewing policy to examining issues it has determined the community is most interested in. City Council approved the plan July 22. “We’re trying to get away from wordsmithing policies and really get at the meat of what concerns people,” she says.

The commission will first examine the topic of services and public safety issues related to homelessness. A panel of EPD officers will explain how they enforce laws within the homeless community and how the EPD interacts with social service agencies, Police Commission member and City Councilor Claire Syrett says. The commission will also check in with the St. Vincent de Paul car camping manager. Police sometimes ask the car camping program to intervene in cases of illegal car camping and connect homeless campers with services.

Lange and Syrett say that creating policy around emerging police technologies such as license plate scanners and aerial drones is also a Police Commission priority, including limiting how long data from license plate scanners can be kept. “We don’t want to be creating databases of people who aren’t under suspicion of doing anything wrong,” Syrett says.

Critics of the Police Commission say that it lacks the authority to influence real change. Former Copwatch activist, videographer and longtime EPD critic Tim Lewis says that while focusing on issues seems to be a better path, he’s skeptical that it will make a difference. “I don’t think that they have any teeth anyway,” he says. Shedding light upon police activity through activism gets results, he says.

Syrett says it wouldn’t be appropriate for an unelected body like the Police Commission to have direct authority over EPD. “The purpose of the Police Commission and its charter is to advise the chief on policy and to provide the community’s perspective,” she says. If there were a major disconnect between the community and chief, she says, it may be appropriate for the commission to turn to the City Council.

The Police Commission is on summer break and will meet again Sept. 12 at EPD headquarters on Country Club Road. Meeting information is at wkly.ws/1iu, and the revised work plan with the list of community issues of concern is at wkly.ws/1iv. — Shannon Finnell

MUPTE SUSPENSION EXTENDED AGAIN

The Eugene City Council has extended the suspension of the controversial Multiple-Unit Property Tax Exemption (MUPTE) for a second time, which means it might not grant more tax breaks for as long as a year. MUPTE allows City Council to grant 10-year property tax waivers to housing developers in the downtown area. It has come under

increasing public scrutiny since granting large property tax waivers to student housing companies Capstone and Core Campus. Under the new suspension ordinance, MUPTE could remain dormant until July 31, 2014.

In anticipation of the Aug. 31, 2013, date when the suspension was set to expire, neighborhood advocate and MUPTE critic Paul Conte began work on the initiative process to craft a 2014 ballot measure terminating the MUPTE program. Opponents of MUPTE say that the program isn’t being used to spur the type of development that Eugeneans want, and concerns of the public are ignored.

Conte says that whether he moves forward with the initiative depends on what Eugeneans think should happen. “With that ballot measure ready for signature collection at any time, and the MUPTE program suspended for almost another year, I’ll work this fall to organize a community-based discussion of what should be done,” he says. At their July 24 work session, city councilors echoed the desire to include stakeholders in the decision.

If the MUPTE program is to remain in place, Conte says, the community should determine for what kinds of projects these tax breaks are granted. “One thing is certain, decisions on these important taxation and housing policies should not remain in the hands of Jon Ruiz and his pro-developer staff,” he says. “If necessary, the potential ballot initiative can make sure of that.”

Some councilors, most vocally Mike Clark and George Poling, expressed concern at the work session that MUPTE reforms wouldn’t be made in time to grant more tax breaks by the summer 2014 construction season. Councilor George Brown wanted to set the sunset date of the

COUNTY TEMPESTS CONTINUE UNRESOLVED

Recent allegations that County Administrator Liane Richardson was asking employees to alter how she added money to her paycheck in a way not authorized by her employment contract came to light thanks to a county employee whistleblower, backed by the AFSCME union. An “outside investigation” was launched into this incident, overseen by County Counsel Stephen Dingle, but county documents appear to indicate Richardson should have been aware that what she was doing was improper.

As a result of the whistleblowing the county administrator placed herself on paid administrative leave. In a July 26 letter to the board, the AFSCME union questioned Dingle’s ability to impartially oversee the investigation, given that Dingle and Richardson worked closely together in the past, that Richardson consulted with Dingle on her payments and that Dingle asked for a 14 percent raise at the same time Richardson asked for her \$20,000 raise.

In a statement, Dingle defended his overseeing of the outside investigation and said that it would be “inappropriate to disclose facts specific to any investigation before the investigation is completed, potentially compromising the investigation itself or calling into question the integrity of the investigation once completed.”

It is not clear why Richardson, whose base salary is more than \$150,000 a year, sought such a large wage increase. County records show that Liane Inkster Richardson and Mark A. Richardson filed for dissolution of marriage on May 2, 2013.

When former commissioner Rob Handy was investigated for ethics violations that were later deemed unfounded, he was locked out of his office and from his county emails. *EW* asked if Richardson has similarly been locked out. County spokesperson Anne Marie Levis says, “For anyone on administrative leave, the practice of the county is to restrict access to county resources such as email and office space.”

Not only does the administrator’s contract not appear to allow for the changes she made to her pay without board approval, the most recent changes to the county’s Administrative Procedures Manual, dated Oct. 4, 2012, are signed by Richardson, which implies she was aware of the county’s rules.

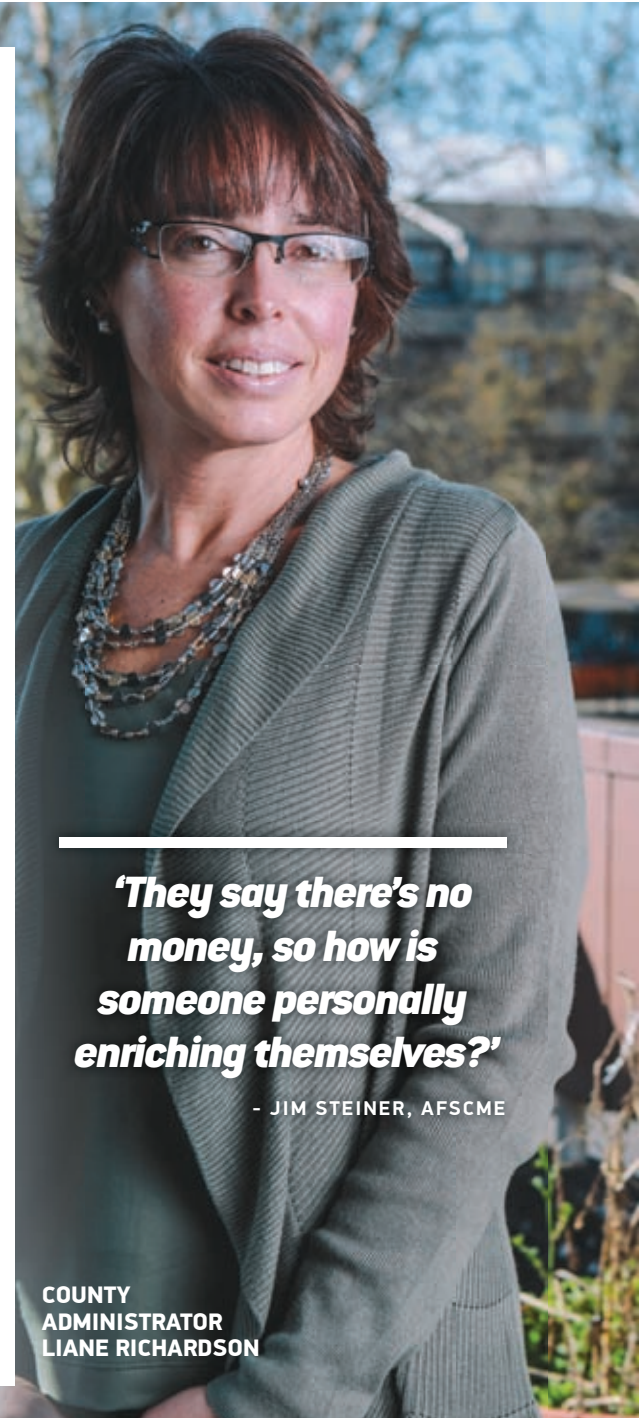
The manual says the maximum hours of time management an employee can “sell back” for cash compensation is 80. Thus far the documents and emails related to the pay controversy *EW* has accessed have concentrated on deferred compensation and “time management” leave-with-pay hours. The AFSCME union and *EW* separately have made a public records request for emails and documents related to Richardson’s pay, gross wages, deferred compensation, PERS, time management or bonuses.

Jim Steiner of AFSCME says the union inquired into the compensation and related issues for Dingle as well as Richardson because they are related to collective bargaining for union employees. “They say there’s no money, so how is someone personally enriching themselves?” he asks.

The county has been underfunded for years, and during the time Richardson was allegedly making changes to the money she was taking home and asking for a 15 percent raise, the county was asking voters to pass a jail levy and making cuts to social programs. All rules, policies and procedures should be applied equitably, Steiner says, pointing out that union members have made personal sacrifices in offering “to cut certain wages and benefits because it best serves the county as a whole, and our members are taxpayers.”

The identity of the whistleblowing county employee who alerted the union to the pay issue has not been publicly disclosed. The employee was so worried, or the atmosphere at county offices is so strained, that more than half of the Lane County Commission’s statement to the media on the Richardson issue was devoted to explaining that “we will protect the employee’s rights to bring matters of concern to our attention without any retribution.”

The investigation is expected to wrap up in the near future, but *EW* has not been given a release date for its results. — Camilla Mortensen



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— JIM STEINER, AFSCME

COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR LIANE RICHARDSON