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COUNCIL'S AUTOMATIC PAY RAISES QUESTIONED

BYLINE: By ALISON GRANT; and ROBERT VICKERS; PLAIN DEALER REPORTERS

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LENGTH: 1177 words

Imagine having a part-time job in which you are guaranteed a 6 percent annual raise, no matter how well you do your work.

Cleveland's 21 City Council members have had that deal since 1986. They make more than \$53,000 now and will earn more than \$90,000 within a decade.

Their pay is almost 2 times the median household income of the voters who put them in office, double what their counterparts get in Columbus and Akron and triple the council pay in Toledo. In all of the cities, the jobs are officially part time.

But what strikes some local council observers as bad public policy is not how much the Clevelanders make, but the fact that their raises take effect automatically. The public has no citizen comment or vote by the all-Democratic council to scrutinize.

"It's a way of sneaking through raises that has absolutely no political courage," said James Trakas, chairman of the Cuyahoga County Republican Party.

"When pay-raise bills are up, they're always tough votes. People have a right to come down, lobby their council people and put their two cents in."

A Cleveland council member was paid \$27,000 a year when the current pay plan was set by legislation in 1986.

Inflation was 4.6 percent a year but now is 1.6 percent a year. And a 6 percent raise when inflation is so low "is very, very substantial," said J. Lee Bailey, executive director of the Citizens League.

Freshman Councilman Joe Cimperman also is criticizing the automatic raise.

"That's wrong," he said. "We pride ourselves down here on oversight and being fiscal hawks. Why aren't we like that with ourselves?"

Cimperman, an \$18,000-a-year social worker when he won election in 1997, said he was told by other council members to be quiet when he raised questions about his salary after landing on council. He was advised that discussing it would antagonize other council members, most of whom, unlike Cimperman, were supporting a family.

"I'll probably get beaten up in the garage by my colleagues for saying this," he said.

But Kenneth L. Johnson, chairman of council's Finance Committee, said the raises were intended to bring sagging council salaries more in line with what city directors and commissioners make. Those can range from \$40,000 to more than \$100,000.

"The rationale behind it was that council members were slowly becoming full time, and they were grossly underpaid," Johnson said. "I think it should keep going until we reach the parity of the jobs that we do."

Council President Jay Westbrook agreed that the job is part time in name only, with a work week that can stretch to 50 to 70 hours.

"It carries as much or more responsibility as a commissioner or director," he said.

Council's senior member, Michael D. Polensek, said he had always treated the job as a full-time pursuit.

Like many of his colleagues, he attends numerous council committees and fields dozens of residents' calls a day.

"What is a councilman?" he asked. "We're developers, ombudsmen, complaint takers, community advocates."

Akron, Toledo, Columbus and Cincinnati also put a part-time label on the job, but officials in those cities said some members put in full work weeks. All five cities pay their council presidents more than regular council members. In Cleveland, Westbrook gets an extra \$10,000, plus use of a city car.

"It's like anything else," said Mark Williamson, Akron's director of communications. "Some city council members work their butts off. Other city council members don't."

Although Cleveland's council pay is rising 6 percent a year, Mayor Michael R. White gets the same as the city's unions, often a cost-of-living adjustment. The raise this year was 3 percent, giving White a salary of \$104,325.

Pegging council raises to those of unionized city employees - the formula in Akron - or tying them to the inflation rate would be better than a 6 percent guarantee, Bailey said.

Sylvester Murray, a professor of public administration at Cleveland State University, said automatic raises for public officials were a poor idea because they do not account for the fluctuating economy.

"Labor union contracts have at most three years," said Murray, a former city manager in Cincinnati.

"That's as much as smart economists will project."

Columbus council members also vote for their own raises, but they do not take effect until the next term in office. In Cincinnati, the pay is 75 percent of Hamilton County commissioners' salary, which is set by state lawmakers.

Toledo has the toughest salary policy. Raises must be approved by a vote of the electorate. That last happened in 1993, when the city switched from a city manager-council form to a strong mayor-council system.

If one measure of the office's responsibilities was how many people each member represented, the demands in Cleveland are lower than Ohio's other large cities.

Cleveland averages 24,000 people for each representative, while the constituency-per-council member is about 26,000 in Toledo, 38,000 in Cincinnati and almost 94,000 in Columbus. Only Akron, with about 17,000 residents for each member, has a lighter load than Cleveland. Polensek said it was misleading to compare Cleveland to Columbus, where council members serve "at large" instead of representing specific wards.

"You talk to people who serve at large. They don't have the day-to-day contact with constituents," he said. "They're responsible for everything and, in reality, nothing."

The perks of the office in Cleveland rank second among the cities, trailing the benefits afforded Cincinnati council members. The Queen City gives its council members a \$7,170 annual allowance for office expenses and another \$93,040 to hire office assistants. Cincinnati's mayor, who acts as council president, gets \$35,510 for expenses and \$154,620 for assistants.

Murray, Cincinnati's city manager from 1979 to 1985, said those salaries and allowances were out of whack, especially since the city manager's office has a large role in handling citizen complaints.

In Cleveland, members get an expense account of up to \$14,400 a year, plus an allowance to pay a 30-hour-a-week legislative assistant.

Akron doesn't reimburse members for anything except business-related cell phone calls, although the Akron council president has use of a city car and can fill it for free at a city pump.

Toledo reimburses up to \$200 a month in expenses, and Columbus has no formal provisions to reimburse its council members' expenses.

"If a council member needs to go to an event and there was [paid] parking, we would give them \$4 out of petty cash," said Mark Dempsey, Columbus fiscal officer.

Westbrook defended Cleveland's compensation, saying "people who care about government" don't have a problem with it.

But Murray said council should rethink its expanding paycheck.

"There's no way to stop it, so that's bad public policy," he said. "I recommend that there be an independent citizens' commission that comes into being every third year to review the salaries of the mayor and the council and other elected officials."

GRAPHIC: CHART : PLAIN DEALER (Page 6A); Cleveland city council salaries tops for Ohio's big cities; Cleveland may be Ohio's second-largest city, but its city council is the largest, and so are their salaries.; * U.S. Census Bureau estimates released in November 1997.; SOURCES: City councils for the cities.

Plain Dealer (Cleveland, Ohio)

October 12, 2000 Thursday, FINAL / EAST

COUNCILMAN LINKS WHITE TO NEGATIVE MAILING

BYLINE: By CHRISTOPHER QUINN; PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

SECTION: METRO; Pg. 5B

LENGTH: 639 words

Six days before an attack on Cleveland City Council President Michael Polensek arrived in mailboxes throughout his Collinwood neighborhood, an aide to Mayor Michael R. White bought mailing labels for registered voters in Polensek's ward.

Records at the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections show that Marvin Hayes, White's government liaison, also bought preprinted mailing labels for voters in Councilman Michael Dolan's ward on Sept. 6. An anonymous mailing attacking Dolan was postmarked 13 days later.

Polensek said yesterday that Hayes' purchase of the labels supports council's contention that White is running a dirty-tricks campaign, but White denies the charge. White spokesman Brian Rothenberg said Hayes bought the labels in his efforts to get Al Gore elected.

"In case The Plain Dealer failed to notice," White said in a written statement, "we are in the midst of a presidential election year and I am engaged in promoting a candidate for that office. Mr. Hayes, during his lunch hour and off hours, will continue his work to that end."

The administration would not explain, however, why it bought labels for isolated sections of the city and not for a citywide campaign on Gore's behalf.

Polensek said yesterday the anti-council mailings violate election laws because they do not identify who paid for them, and he said County Prosecutor William Mason should investigate.

"That's a political act," Polensek said. "Somebody paid for postage, envelopes and printing." Rothenberg ridiculed the idea of a criminal investigation.

"It looks like Mike Polensek has another witch hunt investigation, but this time he doesn't want to do it.

He wants to pass it along," Rothenberg said.

Doug Weiner, Mason's criminal division chief, said he had received no official complaint.

"We cannot speculate on an unreported 'possible' offense which may or may not fall within this office's jurisdiction," Weiner said.

Five anti-council mailings have gone out so far, but not all in wards where Hayes bought mailing labels.

The mailing in Polensek's ward was critical of the city budget council prepared. In Dolan's West Side neighborhood, Ward 21, the mailing questioned why Dolan favored an advertising company for airport business. Another attacked Councilman Michael O'Malley, and another publicized council's rate of pay.

The most recent mailing said downtown Councilman Joe Cimperman favored a pay raise for council, but Cimperman is one of only two council members to state publicly they want to end council's automatic 6 percent annual raises.

White's statement says he and his staff will continue to work during their own time to elect

candidates they favor.

According to Rothenberg, Hayes was trying to help Gore when he bought 2,206 mailing labels Sept. 6 for parts of five council wards, all homes to council members critical of the mayor. The five are Polensek, Dolan, Tim Melena, Bill Patmon and Edward Rybka. The cost of the labels was almost \$50.

Five days later, Hayes paid nearly \$360 for 16,000 labels, for every voter's home in the wards of Patmon, Frank Jackson and Craig Willis. Neither Jackson nor Willis has been critical of the mayor.

Rothenberg said the administration would buy mailing labels for other wards later.

Despite Rothenberg's claim that White strongly favors Gore, a tersely worded e-mail message by White in June conveyed the mayor's displeasure with the Gore campaign. In the e-mail, to Hayes, White said he was "personally insulted" that the Gore campaign was visiting Columbus instead of Cleveland for an empowerment zone conference.

"They won't wrap up Ohio in Columbus. They only wrap up Ohio by taking Cleveland and Cuyahoga County," White's e-mail says. "This is another insensitive act by the Gore people to this administration. MARVIN ... PLEASE TELL THEM VERBATIM."

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January 17, 2002 Thursday, Final / All

Stepping off the escalator

BYLINE: The Plain Dealer

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In 1984, the members of Cleveland City Council voted themselves a very sweet deal: Anytime a majority of city unions got a pay raise, of any size, council members would get a 6 percent hike. Council pay has soared from \$26,664 in 1986, when the pay law kicked in, to \$63,901 this year.

One of the sweetest parts of the law was the way it spared council members from actually having to vote themselves a raise. Politicians hate those votes because they tend to end up in attack ads run by their opponents. Thanks to the ingenuity of former Council President George L. Forbes, Cleveland City Councilmembers get their cash without leaving behind any incriminating evidence.

A few years ago, first Joe Cimperman, then Jay Westbrook suggested to their colleagues that the deal was a little too sweet in a city where the mean income in 1999 was barely \$26,000 and where city employees rarely see anything approaching a 6 percent raise. Their suggestions were ignored. Then last fall, outgoing Mayor Michael R. White hammered the escalator clause in mailings to voters and on billboards in the wards of members he especially loathed. Council hastily promised to deal with the pay issue this January.

This week, as its first major action, the new council kept that promise. Future raises will mirror those of union workers. But because this council cannot legally alter its compensation, that new statute won't take effect until 2006. By then, council members will be making more than \$76,000 a year.

Still pretty sweet.

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Jackson turns down raise; Some on council also refuse increase

BYLINE: Henry J. Gomez, Plain Dealer Reporter

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Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson quietly turned down an automatic pay raise this year, amid steep cost-cutting at City Hall.

Jackson was due to collect an extra \$2,655 in 2009 - a 2 percent bump triggered because of raises negotiated for unionized city employees. Instead, his salary will stay at \$132,775.

At least a third of the 21-member Cleveland City Council, including Council President Martin J. Sweeney, followed Jackson's lead and agreed to give up scheduled pay increases, too.

The combined savings - about \$15,000, maybe more, depending on how many council members pass - are minimal for a city that expects to spend \$540 million this year. But for Jackson, forgoing a raise this year is recognition of uniquely tough economic times, his spokeswoman said.

"The mayor has said that we are in this together," said Andrea Taylor, Jackson's press secretary.

"This would be an example of his commitment to that statement."

Last year, as Cleveland grappled with rising costs and declining revenues, Jackson froze pay for all city workers who were not subject to the collective bargaining unit's negotiated raises.

"I can't do that and then give myself a raise," Jackson said Thursday. Jackson is not the only Ohio mayor to give back. In Columbus, Michael Coleman said last year that he would keep his annual salary at \$152,000 and freeze pay for department heads.

For council members, the automatic increase bumped their annual pay from \$72,586 to \$74,038.

The council can enact salary changes only in even-numbered years and, even then, the changes cannot take effect until the next council term, according to the city charter.

After Jackson declined his raise, council officials told members in January that they could voluntarily waive theirs, said Councilman Joe Cimperman, who decided to give up his raise.

"Everyone is trying to do more with less," said Cimperman, who has proposed freezing council pay in the past.

"The fact of the matter is that we have a situation where many people are struggling in our wards, and I just didn't feel right about taking it."

According to a list provided by council spokeswoman Katherine Bulava, the council members who have joined Cimperman in giving up raises are Dona Brady, Martin Keane, Terrell Pruitt, Sabra Pierce Scott, Jay Westbrook and Sweeney, who makes an extra \$10,000 a year for serving as the council president.

Bulava said others could be planning to pass up the raises, but their paperwork has not been processed.

She cited Councilman Kevin Kelley as one example.

Councilman Kevin Kelley said he filled out the required form weeks ago, but forgot to turn it in until Thursday, after a Plain Dealer reporter asked about the raises.

Councilwoman Mamie Mitchell agreed to give half of her raise back. And Councilman Tony Brancatelli pledged to donate his 2 percent raise to charities in his community.

"Instead of giving it back to the city, I'm going to give it back to the agencies and organizations whose budgets are also being cut," Brancatelli said.

Similarly, Councilman Kevin Conwell said he did not give back his raise because he donates "so much money" to community groups.

Several council members whose names do not appear on Bulava's list did not return phone calls Thursday. Others confirmed that they have decided to keep the money.

"I'm the sole bread-winner in my family," said Councilman Brian Cummins.

Sweeney said he did not encourage his colleagues to give back their raises.

"Each council member is elected by their own constituency and they make their own decisions based on their own financial situations," the council president said. "I don't pretend to know each and every council member's personal financial situation."

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