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Inland elected officials salaries examined



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By JOHN F. HILL and JEFF HORSEMAN | The Press-Enterprise

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Council members in 17 "general law" cities in western Riverside and San

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Bernardino counties earn less than half the pay of their counterparts in charter cities, a review of public records has found.

City managers in these Inland cities also make less, though the gap is smaller.

Cities following the general law model in California have less control over their affairs than cities with charters. Most California cities are general law, which binds them closely to state laws on matters such as salaries and when elections are held.

The earnings of high-ranking public officials have been the source of scrutiny this summer after it was revealed that the city manager of Bell, a charter city of just under 40,000 in Los Angeles County, had a annual salary of nearly \$800,000 and some council members earned about \$100,000 a year.

Under general law guidelines, city council salaries are tied to a city's size. Cities of 35,000 to 50,000 people, for example, can pay their council members \$400 a month.

Council members can give themselves raises that go beyond those guidelines. But the pay hikes can't be more than 5 percent

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The state constitution allows cities to write charters, giving them greater flexibility in making their own rules.

Only 119 of California's 480 municipalities are charter cities, including Riverside, San Bernardino, Norco and Loma Linda.

Cities statewide say they are fielding more requests from news outlets and the public about their pay, and California State Controller John Chiang this month announced plans to post city and county salaries on his website. Some local cities have posted salary information online, including Wildomar, Calimesa and Redlands.

BOOSTS FROM BOARDS

Council members in Inland general law cities earn an average of \$513 a month, compared to \$1,286 a month for local charter cities.

Council members also are paid for sitting on other boards and committees. For example, Murrieta council members earn \$70 each time they meet as the Murrieta Fire District Board.

Such meetings often take place during regular council meetings. In some cases, Bell council members received thousands of dollars for meetings that lasted one minute.

None of the Inland cities surveyed pay their council members nearly that much for board meetings. Most local council members earn less than \$100 for each time they meet as the local redevelopment agency or community services district board.

Many cities offer benefits to elected officials, such as pensions, health insurance, life insurance and car and cell phone allowances. In Corona, for example, council members and their families can get access to counseling.

In some cases, Inland cities pay more for these benefits than for council salaries. Lake Elsinore will pay up to \$1,200 per month for health plans covering council members and their families – three times the \$400 council stipend paid to each council member every month.

TEMECULA TOPS

Managers of Inland general law cities earn an average of \$203,000 a year, a figure that doesn't include benefits. For charter cities in western Riverside and San Bernardino counties, the average salary is just under \$228,000.

Of the local general law cities, Temecula City Manager Shawn Nelson earns the most at \$291,571. He is second in the region only to Riverside's Brad Hudson, who makes \$294,525.

Nelson could not be reached for comment. Mayor Jeff Comerchero said Nelson's salary was fair, noting that Nelson has been city manager since 1999 and he started out making less than \$10,000 a month.

"If a city wants to be the best, you've got to hire and keep the best and that's what we've got in Shawn Nelson," Comerchero said.

Canyon Lake, another southwest Riverside County city, has the lowest-paid manager in the region, with Lori Moss making \$135,000.

City manager pay isn't necessarily tied to a city's size. Calimesa, which has roughly 7,500 residents, pays Randy Anstine \$175,780. Beaumont's Alan Kapanicas gets \$176,000 to run a city nearly five times as large.

A former city manager in Banning, Anstine said he came out of retirement to take over in Calimesa on an interim basis before the



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council asked him to take the permanent job last year. He said he lost income by returning to work full-time and his salary accounts for what he loses in retirement pay.

PERRIS PAYS MORE

In Perris, a general law city of fewer than 60,000, council members earn \$890 a month. By comparison, Temecula, which has about 105,000 residents according to state estimates, pays its council members \$600 a month.

State law sets council salaries for general law cities of 50,000 to 75,000 at \$500 a month. The Perris council raised its monthly pay in from \$378 to \$809 in 2006 – the first raise in 16 years – and from \$809 to \$890 in 2008.

Perris council members also get a \$400 a month car allowance, \$30 per redevelopment agency meeting and medical, life insurance and retirement benefits.

Councilman Mark Yarbrough, who has been in office since 1997, said he didn't know that the Perris council's pay was higher than general law cities of similar size.

"I do it because I care about my community," said Yarbrough, who owns a tow company and an auto sales/repair shop. "The stipends and allowances we get, if I had to live on it, it would be extremely difficult."

Moreno Valley's City Council earns the most among Inland general law cities. Council members for the city of more than 180,000 earn \$1,079 a month in addition to \$100 for each community services district meeting and \$30 for each redevelopment agency meeting.

Mayor Bonnie Flickinger said the council has refused pay increases even as the city grew. She said she spends 40 to 45 hours a week on city business and had to quit her full-time job during her first stint as mayor to handle her public responsibilities.

NOT ENOUGH?

Wildomar Councilman Scott Farnam said he isn't seeking re-election this year because the council's time demands made it difficult to support his family.

"I absolutely love being an elected official. I enjoy all the regional boards. I love serving my community. But I'm self-employed," said Farnam, whose base council pay is \$300 a month. "It makes it really, really hard to earn a living."

Banning Councilwoman Barbara Hanna said the \$4,680 each council member makes annually is fair. She said council members should be paid.

"I don't think you should have to be independently wealthy to be on the council," Hanna said.

In Murrieta, where the city manager makes just over \$210,000 a year and council members earn \$600 per meeting, an initiative on the November ballot would limit the manager's pay to 2½ times the median household income.

Bob Kowell, a conservative activist behind the initiative, said he thinks the Bell scandal "absolutely" will help the proposal pass.

"Everyone I talked to is excited about it, except those who are making money off (the current system)," he said. "These guys could reach (the level of Bell) if people just didn't care."

Staff Writers Gene Ghiotto, Laurie Lucas, Julissa McKinnon, Leslie Parrilla, Brian Rokos, Darrell R. Santschi, Gail Wesson and Erin Waldner contributed to this report.

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TWO KINDS OF CITIES

GENERAL LAW: These cities are bound by state law on everything from when elections are held to how much elected officials earn. Most cities in the state are of this variety.

CHARTER: Fewer than 120 California cities have charters, which gives them greater authority over their own affairs, including salaries. Inland charter cities include Riverside, San Bernardino, Norco and Loma Linda.

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