

1-16-07 San Gabriel Valley Tribune (California) (Officials' Pay).txt
San Gabriel Valley Tribune (California)

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HEADLINE: Officials' pay under scrutiny

BYLINE: By Fred Ortega Staff Writer

Council members for three Valley cities get paid nearly 10 times the maximum amount allowed under state law for serving on their communities' redevelopment agencies, more than a year after implementation of a bill designed to limit compensation for service on such boards.

Assembly Bill 11, passed by the Legislature in September 2005 and enacted last January, limits pay for redevelopment or community development commission members to no more than \$150 per month. Most cities appoint council members to serve concurrently as redevelopment board members.

The state attorney general later decided that limits set by the bill could not be applied retroactively, so council members elected prior to January 2006 are able to keep their existing pay until their term ends.

"I don't think it's fair for the state to reduce our compensation, especially when they gave themselves a \$12,000 pay raise" in 2005, said West Covina Mayor Mike Touhey, whose current term will not end until 2009. "The state Legislature and Superior Court are guaranteed adjustments, automatic pay increases. The only people they have left out is local government, and they have no problem reducing our salaries."

West Covina has the second-highest paid council in the East San Gabriel Valley after Rosemead.

Both West Covina and Rosemead pay council members \$1,200 per month to serve on their respective redevelopment boards. Baldwin Park pays its council members \$1,100 per month for redevelopment service.

Rosemead Councilman Jay Imperial said he was unaware that his city pays council members considerably more than other cities in the Valley, despite its smaller size. Rosemead council members make more than Baldwin Park and West Covina, a city that is about twice the size of Rosemead's 53,000 population.

"I had never checked. I am not here for the money," said Imperial, who added he agrees with the new law restricting redevelopment salaries.

"I don't have a problem with it. I just have a problem with people in higher office getting raises," he said, echoing Touhey's comments.

State law allows cities to form their own redevelopment zones to combat blight and revitalize urban areas. Redevelopment Agency boards can use eminent domain to acquire rundown properties and resell them to developers.

Assemblyman Hector De La Torre, D-South Gate, sponsored the bill as a result of the abuses of the South Gate City Council, which created a separate committee for its members to serve on and in the process raised the council's base salary by 266 percent.

Baldwin Park Councilman David Olivas, who will continue to receive \$1,200 per month - in addition to his \$600 monthly salary for his council service - until this November, said the new state law is fair.

"If that is the will of the Legislature, so be it," Olivas, an attorney, said. "I typically use that money to donate to local sports groups. I'll just have to dig into my own pocket now."

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The West Covina City Council's current monthly salary of \$1,965 - \$765 a month for council service alone - is not the only compensation members get. The city also pays \$855 per month for health insurance for each council member and their families.

That would bring their total compensation to an equivalent of \$33,840 a year, not counting any additional income from service on other commissions, committees or boards.

By contrast, El Monte, which is larger than West Covina at 115,000 residents, pays its council members \$730 a month plus \$60 a month for redevelopment agency work. That's less than half the West Covina council's nearly \$2,000 a month.

"Of course it costs us money to serve," said El Monte Councilwoman Emily Ishigaki. "Your clothes have to look nice, and clothes aren't cheap nowadays. But it doesn't really take away from your household expenses."

Since the state Legislature made it possible for cities to create redevelopment agencies, it makes sense for the state to regulate how much councils get paid to serve on them, said Doug Johnson, a fellow at the Rose Institute for State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

"This money is supposed to go to revitalize cities and build houses. It is not supposed to be a supplement to council members' salaries," Johnson said.

Kris Vosburgh, executive director of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, said that unlike state or federal lawmakers, city council members do not have to move away from their homes and give up their jobs to serve their constituents.

"We are not asking them to move cross-country and deal with foul weather and screeching lobbyists," said Vosburgh. "A small compensation to make up for the time they lose is justified, but it is hard to imagine that their time is worth over \$500 a meeting."