

## LINCOLN COUNTY COMMISSIONER'S MINUTES

July 7, 2015

The Lincoln County Board of Commissioners met on July 7, 2015, in the Commissioner's office at the Lincoln County Courthouse. Present were Commissioner Mike Cole, Commissioner Greg Larson, Commissioner Mark Peck, Administrative Assistant Bill Bischoff and Clerk and Recorder Robin Benson.

**10 AM Salary Committee Meeting:** Present were Nancy Trotter Higgins, Bonnie Larson, Vic White, Bernie Cassidy, Roby Bowe, and Terry Crooks

The group reviewed and discussed Montana Codes relating to county elected officials salaries and the cost for COLA increases. Total county annual salaries are (approximate) 5,800,000. Cost of a 1.6% COLA would be 92,800. Health Insurance increase cost for FY 15/16 is 145,000. Also provided was a FY 2014 Salary Survey Results conducted by MACo. **Motion** by County Attorney Bernie Cassidy to approve a 1.6% Cost of Living increase across the board for all employees and elected officials. Second by Terry Crooks. Commissioner Mike Cole asked for discussion.

Owner of Larson Lumber, Bonnie Larson said that as a business owner, she has never seen a decline in the economy as she is seeing now. Businesses are at the threshold that will be affected. Bonnie said the closure of the mine could be a contributing factor.

Commissioner Cole said that on the North end of the county, construction has maintained fairly well and feels the retail downtown seems to be strong.

Commissioner Peck said that even with the SRS funding the county is overspending about 1.2 to 1.3 million. Added increased health costs make it difficult to justify a COLA. It is the taxpayer that pays our wages; it's hard to increase taxes at this time. This is not a reflection on the employees and expressed that everyone, including non-county employees deserves more than a 1.6 % COLA. PILT funding is gone even though there is a two year window.

Commissioner Larson said he agreed with Commissioner's Peck's assessment and that it would be nice to offer a Cola but employees need to understand that the County's paying the health insurance is a huge benefit. He stated it is unfortunate that health insurance is increasing so rapidly that it is taking away funds that could be used for other purposes such as a Cola but that is no one's fault just a reality today. He stated that it important that we let employees know the facts and that they are valued.

Commissioner Cole agreed the health insurance is a huge bonus.

Bernie Cassidy said the increased money from a COLA goes to the consumer and is spent in local stores. Is there a place to cut?

Commissioner Peck said he feels there is very little to no fat in the county budget and the county would have to raise mills to get the money for a COLA. Part of public service is that we work for the citizens. It is a bigger cost to the county to carry the insurance, than it would be to offer a COLA.

Terry Crooks stated that to him, it sounds like the commission is being compassionate.

Vic White said that of course everyone needs a raise, but not necessarily true when you have the health insurance. These are choices we have to make.

Bernie Cassidy pointed out that retirement is based on a person's highest salary, so when employees miss the COLA, especially for several years in a row, it is also taking away from retirement.

Robin Benson said although it is very difficult for supervisors to relay another non-COLA year to its employees, education and facts should be relayed. One example is that for a family, the cost of insurance is \$15,130 to the county which is equal to \$7 added to a wage. It is how you look at things. Also, Lincoln County is the only county in the state that still pays full insurance for its employees and families without requesting a portion of it paid by the employee. I don't believe the employees know that it costs the county close to \$1.5 million to provide insurance for its employees.

Commissioner Peck said he would like the commission to hold employee meetings to inform and educate why and how these difficult decisions are being made.

Commissioner Cole said there is motion on the floor that has been seconded to offer a 1.6% COLA across the board to all employees and elected officials. **MOTION** failed. Only one person in attendance voted in favor of the motion.

**MOTION** by Nancy Trotter Higgins to hold the line on the elected official's salaries with no increase. Second by Commissioner Peck. Motion carried unanimously.

1:30 PM **Succession Meeting:** Present were Roby Bowe, Brent Faulkner, and Vic White.

Discussion was about the retirement of Executive Assistant Bill Bischoff and other potential county structural changes. Topics of discussion were H.R., EMA, Planning, and IT. Vic White was asked about replacing Bill Bischoff as Director of Human Resources, and Kirk Kraft taking over EMA. Lisa Oedewaldt would move into the Planning Department and assist with EMA grants. Ernie Anderson would move into IT full time.

The discussion will continue tomorrow, during the regular commission meeting at 3 pm.

**LINCOLN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

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Mike Cole, Chairman

**ATTEST:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Robin A. Benson, Clerk of the Board