

# City Council pay comparisons across King County

[ The following uses public data from govsalaries.com, Wikipedia, individual city websites, and the State Auditor site. In general data is circa 2020. If you find errors please contact me so I can update appropriately. ]

## Summary

Woodinville Council is paid \$7200 per year; meets twice monthly; ~ 2-4 hours each meeting. That's approximately \$75 - \$150 per meeting hour. The Woodinville City Council's pay has not changed in 25 years.

However, as this analysis shows in all reasonable metrics Woodinville Council pay is currently in-line or even slightly high. This implies it was likely too high in 1997 when the city formed and has now come into a more normal range through population growth.

## Job Description:

All City Councilmembers are elected to *represent their citizens* in the regularly scheduled city council meetings. **That is their primary job responsibility.** This analysis focuses on the aspects of each city compared to the council pay.

All cities seek to represent themselves in regional meetings by appointing councilmembers. Further there is always time taken up by lobbying from businesses, developers, and outside interests. However, such functions do not vary much city to city (or scale with population) so they are not relevant to salary discussions.

## Responsibilities:

City Council positions are legislative, not executive. The council does not manage day-to-day operations of the city. They define local ordinances and set the agenda for the city government.

Some larger cities have a separately elected "strong mayor" who operates as a chief executive for the city government. However, the majority of King County's municipalities are "Council-Manager" (also called "weak mayor") systems.

In a weak-mayor system like Woodinville, all council members are equal and elected directly by the people. Then the council votes amongst themselves for a mayor to run the meetings.

This Mayor position sometimes comes with a slightly higher pay to compensate for the added planning effort for the meeting agenda, but it is rarely very much higher. Woodinville's mayor receives an additional \$1200 a year – one hundred dollars more a month. This analysis only focuses on the City Council base salary.

## Key City Differences

Cities have varying services:

- **Police and Fire** – Some cities run their own Police and/or Fire departments. This involves significantly larger and more highly paid workforce (& larger payroll budget). Other cities contract for services to King County Sheriff and/or a regional Fire district. *Woodinville contracts for Police and Fire.*
- **Utilities** – Water, Sewer, and Power services are very often provided by region or private companies. In cases where a city runs utilizes broader legislative duties apply. *Woodinville does not run its own utilities.*
- **Recreation Departments** – Cities that have a recreation department will have extra operational expenses and larger total employee counts, but many are part-time, so the overall payroll does not increase inline to the employees. *Woodinville does not have a separate recreation department.*

Based on these differences a city council may have more or less responsibility.

## Analysis:

When performing compensation analysis comparable data is only part of the story. The most important question for any adjusting a salary is “Why is a change needed?”. Three principles of compensation review in the business world are:

1. Is it difficult to fill the position?  
⇒ No, Woodinville has historically had competitive elections for most positions.
2. Do employees quit because of the pay?  
⇒ No, in the last decade most retirements have been due to the councilmembers moving out of the city.
3. What is comparable pay for the same role elsewhere (e.g. are you losing people to the competition)?  
⇒ See more below.

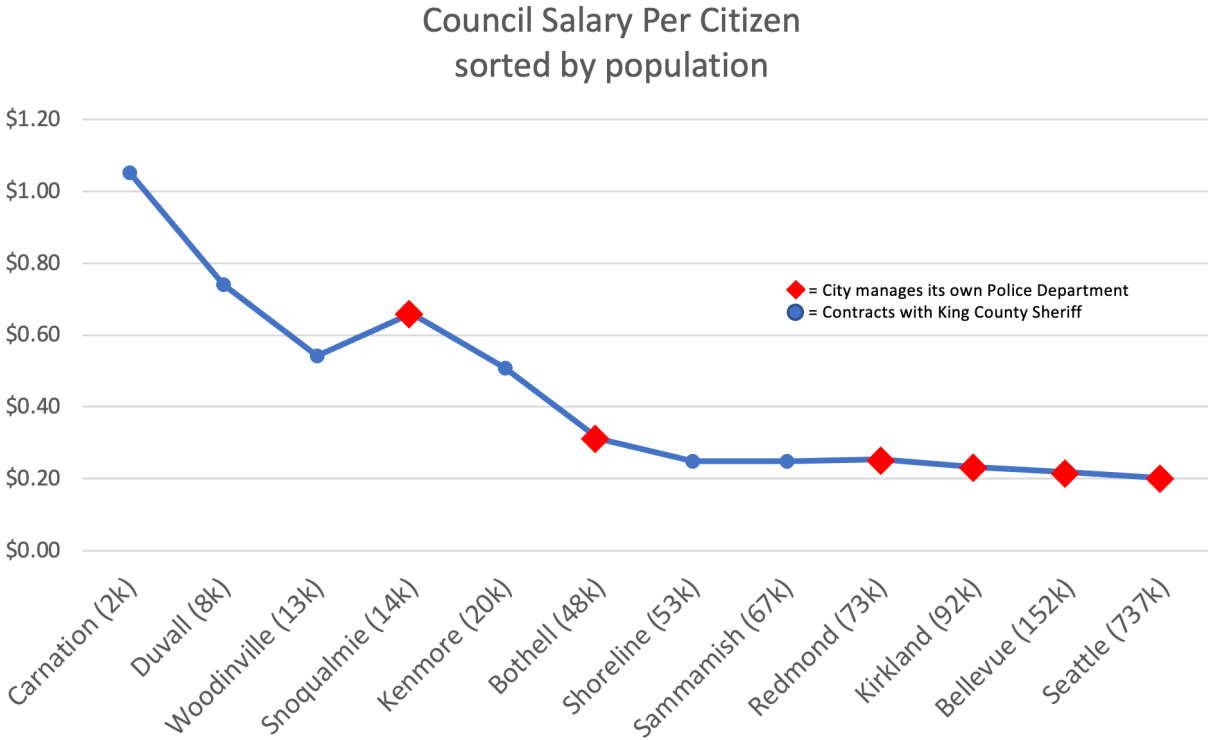
With political positions an additional consideration applies:

4. Is the desire to encourage **career politicians** OR community **representatives**?

Woodinville City Council seats are nonpartisan and the election campaigns can be very inexpensive. As an elected position’s salary increases, the cost of the election campaigns goes up, often blocking normal citizens from running. So far Woodinville has avoided this.

*When elections lead to a full-time jobs, politician tend to think of campaigns and contributors – not doing what’s right for the citizens.*

# North King County, \$ per-citizen



This is the graph from the postcard with two additional much smaller cities. A clear trend appears, larger cities average lower council pay per citizen flattening to below 25cents a citizen. It is a remarkably smooth curve indicating to me that this is a normal growth process for cities.

The only significant outlier is Snoqualmie. Looking into this, their Police department is contracting service its neighbors. Meaning the Snoqualmie Police serves 22k citizens, not 14k. This in addition to running an independent Police Department instead of contracting with the Sheriff may explain the discrepancy.

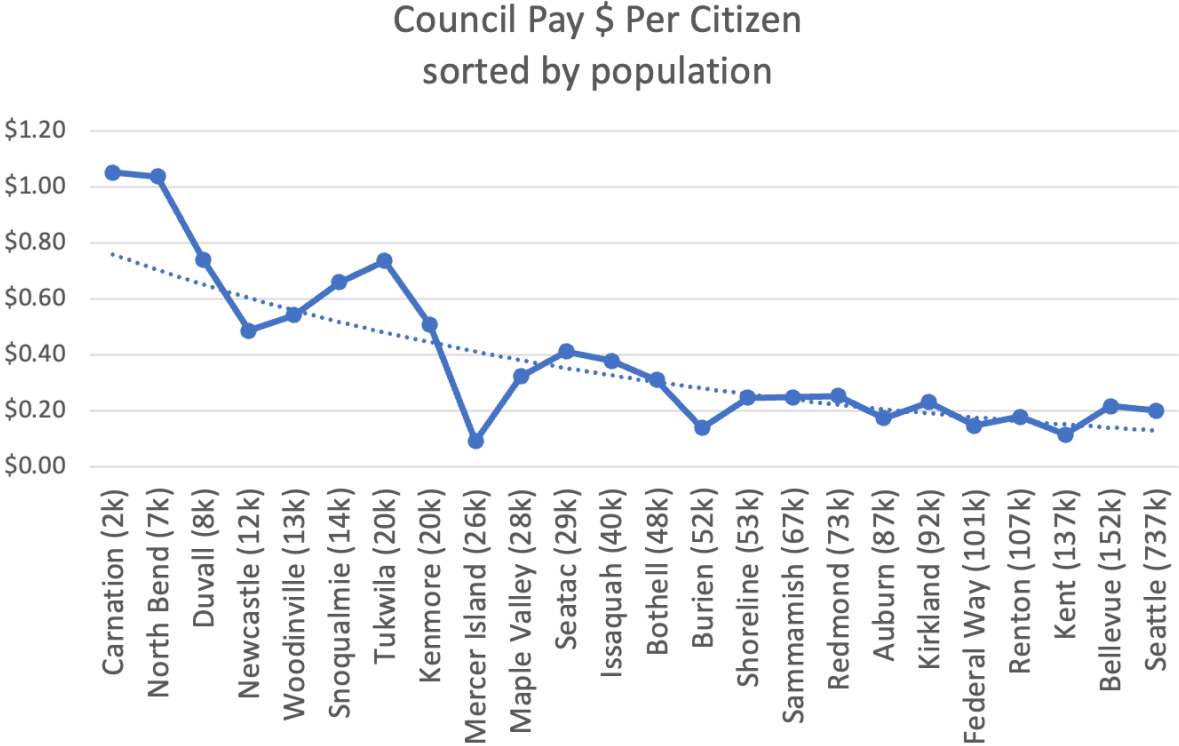
An additional note, smaller communities would have more difficulty finding enough councilmembers; thus the curve makes sense in terms of the first principle of compensation review ([page two of the document](#)). Another interesting note: Carnation and Duvall run their own Sewer systems – so that council is managing a more complex city than their 2k and 7k citizens otherwise imply.

For perspective, reverse the pattern:

- IF Seattle were paid like Woodinville’s Council (54 cents per citizen); each Seattle councilmember would be receiving about \$400,000 per year instead of \$148k
- IF our United States Senators were paid like Woodinville, they would have a salary of \$4.2 million dollars (7,887,965 \* 0.54) instead of the \$174k they are paid.

# County-wide, \$ per-citizen

For completeness here is an overview of all\* incorporated municipalities in the county.



More outliers, but the pattern persists. Cities in King County regardless of complexity of services tend to ramp-down their per-citizen council pay into the 20-25 cents range.

Very interesting comparisons:

- Newcastle at 93% of Woodinville’s population pays council 20% less
- Kenmore at 1.5 times Woodinville’s population, contracts with King County Sheriff, and pays its council \$10k (about 1.5 times Woodinville’s salary).
- Mercer Island is 2 times Woodinville’s size and paid less (\$2400).
- Burien is almost **4 times** Woodinville’s population and contracts with King County Sheriff like Woodinville. Yet its council pay is **exactly the same** as Woodinville’s; \$7200 per year.

Without some additional special reason, Woodinville is in-line for a city of its size.

\* Some cities did not have recent salary data on govsalaries.com or I could not determine which employee was city councilmembers. Recently I found Newcastle’s from their city website and added them. Also not on the graph is Medina which does not pay councilmembers.

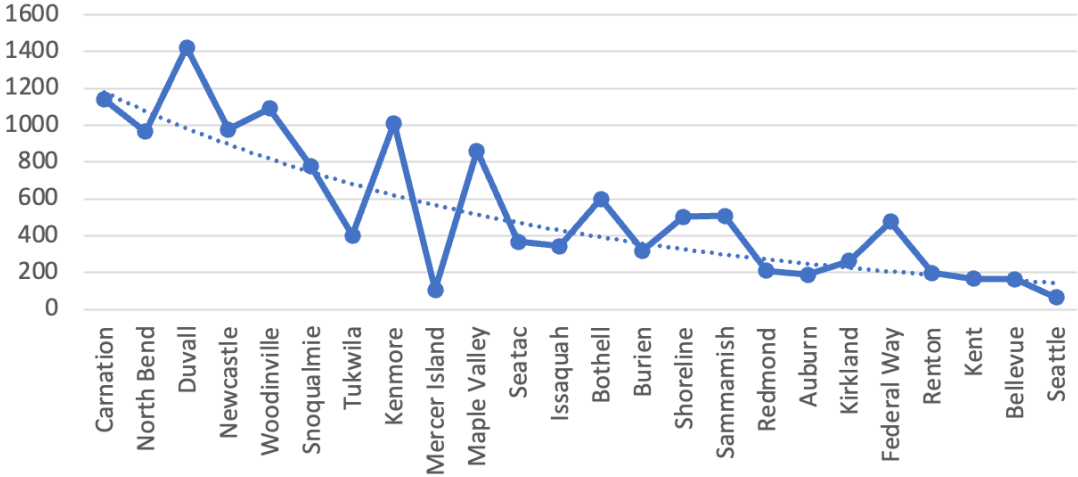
# Capital Budget \$s per M budget

[Disclosure: I am not an accountant... filtering the [State Auditor report on expenditures](#) to remove salaries, wages and personal benefits required some Excel work – *again please send any corrections you find*. This uses the 2017-2018 budget cycles to avoid any pandemic effects.]

In terms of City Council responsibilities setting a bi-annual (2 year) budget is likely the most direct expression of representing the citizens. I have focused on non-employee expenses because cities that operate Police and Fire departments have a higher average payroll; while those with Recreations have much lower average pay (due to part-time staff). Removing the payroll spending in the budget comparisons creates a more accurate view on city spending. (The per-employee headcount analysis is covered on the next page).

City Budgets also include Revenue in addition to Expenditures. However, government is not a money-making operation and paying Councils based the tax revenue would create a perverse incentive to raise taxes. Spending is a better metric.

Council Pay \$ per M\$  
Capital Budget (annualized)

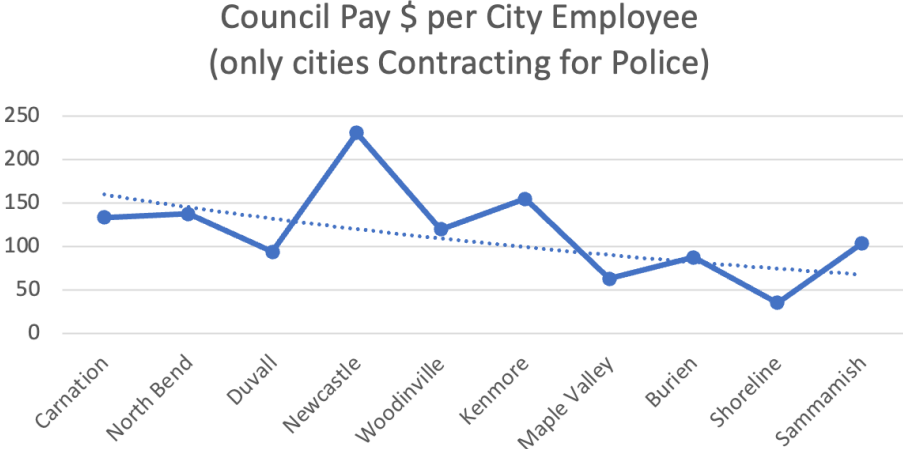


Woodinville City Council seems to be paid above normal.

# Council Salary \$s per city employee

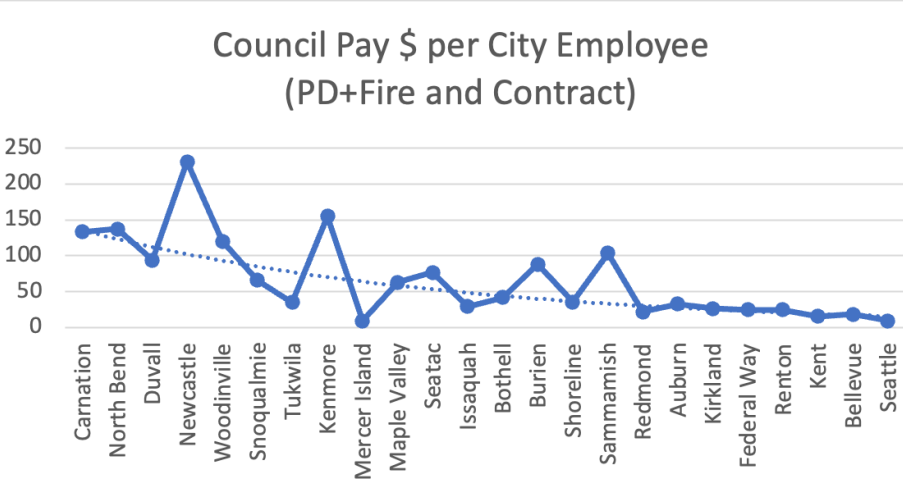
As mentioned, some cities run Police, Fire or Recreation Departments drastically increase the number of employees. Any employee count comparison must focus on “Contract” cities where Police and Fire are provided by other organizations.

An importantly consideration, city councils are a *legislative* body and *do not manage* employees – so this metric is not applicable to council pay. Linking council pay to employee count creates an incentive for bloated bureaucracy rather than a responsive government.



Filtering to remove cities with their own Police & Fire departments, Woodinville is in-line with an appropriate level.

For completeness, see the same graphs for all cities.



Woodinville is slightly overpaid in this view.