

West Covina approves pay increase for city council, commissioners

The West Covina City Council on Tuesday, Dec. 5, approved increasing the council's salaries and benefits as well as commissioners' stipends for the first time in more than 30 years, citing the need to encourage more community members to serve in local government positions.

Council members noted that it is not financially feasible for many members of the community to serve at the current salary at a time of high inflation.

But the action — the first such adjustment in 33 years, officials said — was met with concern from the public, wary of council raises at a time of economic financial uncertainty and the city's own financial ups and downs.

"You've heard speaker after speaker tonight talk about the priorities of the city are all wrong," said Jim Grivich, West Covina resident, during public comment. "They are worried about safety, they want more police, they do not want code enforcement, and they want the streets to be safer. The priorities have to be in the right place. A huge compensation increase is not the priority."

With the council's 5-0 approval, a member's compensation goes from \$9,180 per year to \$24,327 per year, and council benefits for medical, dental, vision, life insurance/accidental death and dismemberment policy, auto allowance and deferred compensation would increase from \$1,444 to \$2,651 per month.

The estimated fiscal impact on the general fund would be about \$80,000 annually, according to a staff report.

"I'd like to clarify that this is a 165% increase, which is five times 33 years, which is the number of years since the last increase, so it is not a compounded amount," said Finance Director Stephanie Sikkema during the meeting.

The Council compensation and benefits would not go into effect until after the November 2024 election. But the commissioner stipends would go

into effect immediately. The last adjustment for West Covina's city council compensation was in 1990, said Sikkema.

"Hopefully, we can encourage, and not discourage, people to run," said Councilmember Tony Wu. "The \$5,000 will not go into your pocket, it is the allowance if you go travel to Sacramento or DC."

Wu added that this increase in council compensation will help council members bring in funds for the city, which requires traveling. It's up to each member if they want to be reimbursed. Having that option is helpful for community members who would like to run in future elections, he said.

Mayor Brian Calderon Tabatabai reiterated Wu's point.

"The \$1,000 allowance that currently exists is not enough to be able to take a trip to Sacramento and to speak and lobby for funds for the city," he said. "The reality is, now having spent some time in Sacramento, there's plenty of opportunities that are missed when we're not in those rooms."

Many qualified community members would make wonderful council members or mayors who want to serve, Tabatabai said, but who may not be able to run because it's financially impossible.

"We want the best representatives," he said. "We want young people to be able to run. We want career people to be able to run. We want family people with young children to be able to run and so let's allow the most amount of people to be able to run in these elections so people can have a great choice. Well, let's remove that, and the law allows us to remove that and it's a benefit for the city."

Approving these compensation increases includes a maximum allowed per statute and providing council benefits and car allowance, increasing council reimbursement allowance to \$5,000.

The fiscal year 2023-24 general fund budget had an estimated revenue-less expenditures of \$176,081.

On Nov. 7, the City Council approved a budget amendment for council allowances, bringing the net change in fund balance to \$156,081 for FY 2023-24.

A planning commissioner's compensation would bump up to \$100 per meeting, a human resources commissioner's compensation would go to \$75 per meeting, a community and senior services commissioner's compensation would go to \$75 per meeting.

State law establishes the maximum amount of City Council salaries based on city population. The amounts set forth in the section have not been adjusted since 1984, according to the staff report.

Officials noted that in June, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed SB 329, which amends the section effective Jan. 1, 2024, to increase the maximum salaries set forth in the section to adjust for inflation since 1984.

"The (SB 329) bill stated that city council is one of the hardest jobs in California government, low levels make it harder for council members to balance careers, raising pay will make it easier for members of marginalized communities to serve and it's important to achieving City Council goals that are reflective of their communities," Sikkema said.

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