

## **Douglas County Board Pay Hike: Perfectly Legal, Totally Wrong**

**By Jessica Herrmann**

*"I'm telling my boss today, I'm voting myself a 10% pay raise. See you in the unemployment line tomorrow."*

*"I feel gracious getting the company wide 3% raise every year, but this...this is just pathetic."*

*"Raises for public officials should be approved by the voters. Isn't it just a voluntary job in the first place?"*

*"And they keep raising our taxes. I wonder how much my property taxes will increase next year?"*

-- Comments on KETV NewsWatch 7 story, "[4 DC board members to vote for own raises Tuesday.](#)"

Yesterday, the Douglas County Board of Commissioners voted to give themselves a 33 percent pay raise for their work as part-time elected officials. The seven commissioners will receive roughly \$50,000 each year beginning in 2018, which they say is comparable to half the salary of a full-time elected official in other counties.

Many taxpayers have expressed concern on social media that a 33 percent wage increase is out of touch with their own personal lives and the real world. Last year, the private sector raised employees' pay by an average of 2.9 percent.<sup>1</sup> These taxpayers also say a \$12,000 salary bump is especially egregious considering Douglas County's property tax rates are among the highest in the nation.<sup>2</sup>

Commissioner Mike Boyle justified the raise as necessary to make the pay of Douglas County board members comparable with Lancaster County. However, data provided by the *Omaha World-Herald* show the total increase far exceeds their Lincoln counterparts and is nearly double the salaries of commissioners in Sarpy County.<sup>3</sup> Douglas County board members will now be paid considerably more for a part-time position than most

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Anne Kates. "Look for Another Modest Pay Raise in 2014." Kiplinger's Personal Finance, February 2014 <http://www.kiplinger.com/article/saving/T012-C000-S002-look-for-a-modest-pay-raise-in-2014.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Table: Who Pays America's Highest Property Taxes?" Forbes.com, Jan. 22, 2009 [http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/22/taxes-homes-property-forbeslife-cx\\_mw\\_0122realestate\\_table.html](http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/22/taxes-homes-property-forbeslife-cx_mw_0122realestate_table.html)

<sup>3</sup> "Compare top positions." Dataomaha.com <http://dataomaha.com/salaries/positions#county-board-member>

other elected officials in Nebraska, including school board members, who receive no pay.

The board's actions set a bad precedent for property tax subdivisions and elected officials across the state. If other public servants decide to follow the lead of Douglas County and vote themselves large increases in pay, it could further exacerbate property tax rates in many counties, particularly in rural parts of the state. Local spending decisions are a large contributor to Nebraska's high property tax situation. Additionally, government officials who recently increased their own wages may lose credibility when negotiating pay and benefits with full-time civilian and public safety workers.

While taxpayers have been outraged to learn of the board's decision, commissioners did follow the letter of the law in passing the increase. Nebraska law provides that the salaries of all county officials shall be set by the local board.<sup>4</sup> The public meeting was previously announced and notice of it appeared in a report in a weekend edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*.

But in reality, it should come as no surprise that few residents of Douglas County really knew about the salary vote before it happened or that virtually no residents appeared to comment at the public meeting at which the vote was made, scheduled for a Tuesday morning at 9 a.m., the week before Christmas.

While many commissioners across Nebraska operate under the same legal framework and have been responsible with setting compensation, the actions by the Douglas County board show that a further check is needed. The Legislature should consider legislation to provide a degree of separation between county officials and compensation.

Such a change should also improve transparency, not only in acknowledging a proposal will be considered, but in providing sufficient time for the public to learn about a potential board pay raise, and to have the opportunity to respond.

Many states, including Iowa and Missouri, set their county commissioners' salaries through an unelected county compensation board. Others, like Colorado, require the state legislature to determine the salaries of all public officials subject to an annual review.

The Douglas County board is also in dire need of a reality check. Nearly 65 million seniors receiving monthly Social Security benefits will not receive an annual cost-of-

---

<sup>4</sup> Neb.Rev.Stat. §23-1114 <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/laws/statutes.php?statute=23-1114>

living adjustment next year. 1,500 Nebraskans recently lost their jobs when ConAgra announced it was moving its headquarters to Chicago, and another 2,500 of the state's manufacturing workers were unemployed in 2016. Most full-time workers would count themselves fortunate to receive even a modest bump in pay. Considering the present economic climate, a pay raise of 33 percent for a part-time position on the taxpayers' dime is incredibly inappropriate.