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Mayor's and council members' duties warrant higher pay

Ann Arbor News (MI) - Sunday, December 30, 2007

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Many qualities make Ann Arbor stand out as a community and distinguish it from comparably sized cities throughout the country.

Clearly, the University of Michigan and Ann Arbor are entwined in many ways. The presence of one of the great research and teaching universities in the world enriches our lives and serves as a magnet for many knowledge-economy startups and technology-driven national and international enterprises. U-M's many world-class schools and programs provide extraordinary resources for the city, its residents and the region, ranging from the U-M Health System to football Saturdays.

The sports, science, literature, art, music, dance and theater available throughout the community - both U-M-related and independent - all set Ann Arbor apart from its apparent peers.

Our civil society in Ann Arbor is, well, civil. Our politics are largely respectful, open and clean. Our nonprofit sector is robust. Downtown living and working are on the upswing and its restaurant and entertainment scene is vibrant and varied.

None of this positive picture is guaranteed. It is the result of vision and leadership across many sectors - the university, business, the nonprofits and both city and county government. Our focus, as the Local Officers Compensation Commission

(LOCC), is on the elected leadership of the city of Ann Arbor. Every two years, the commission meets to review the pay levels of our local officials. It is our job to look at their roles and responsibilities, to research compensation levels in other Michigan cities, and to recommend an appropriate salary for the mayor and City Council members.

This year, the LOCC members who participated in the deliberations - in addition to the two of us - were chair Roger Hewitt, Eunice Burns and Michael Schippani.

The office of mayor

The mayor, the only person elected by all of the people of the community, must gather signatures in every one of the wards to be nominated to run and must campaign throughout the city to attract the votes to be elected. The mayor has one vote of the 11 on the council.

Ann Arbor has an "administrator/mayor" form of government. That means that the council hires a professional administrator to run the city government while the citizens elect the mayor to provide public leadership for the entire city. What may have initially begun as a part-time position with significant ceremonial duties has over the years expanded to incorporate opportunities for substantive leadership on a variety of complex issues affecting the city's quality of life. Among these are environmental stewardship, regional transportation, housing and urban design. That leadership is exercised in a variety of local, state and national forums.

It is arguable that leadership responsibilities at this level require much more than "part-time" attention. In fact, it may not be possible to carry out such responsibilities well and still hold an outside job adequate to pay the bills.

Four years ago, in recognition of the reality of the changes in the role played by the mayor, the LOCC recommended a substantial increase to the salary for the office. The council, which has the power to turn down the LOCC's recommendations, agreed: Over two years, the pay level rose to \$40,000, still a part-time rate given the responsibilities of the position. Two years ago, the LOCC again spent hours reviewing pay comparisons with elected mayors throughout the state and again discussed job expectations. The mayor's position is analogous to the chairperson of the board of directors of a large corporation. The city of Ann Arbor has a budget of just under \$300 million. Imagine asking a person to chair such a corporation in the private sector with a salary of \$40,000 a year. We concluded that the mayor of a city like Ann Arbor, without respect to the party or the incumbent, was worth much more. At that time, however, we demurred. Because of the budget pressures, we recommended a minimal pay raise of 3 percent, equal to the pay raise given to the other employees of the city. That pay raise was turned down by the council.

The City Council

The members of Ann Arbor's City Council are dramatically underpaid for the job we ask them to perform as well. While these are and should remain part-time positions, council members work tirelessly with multiple meetings every week and phone lines that are often busy until late in the evening. They are asked to oversee the huge budget and still worry about streetlights that are out! For that we pay them \$15,000 a year. Neither the mayor nor council members receive any benefits.

Two years ago the LOCC also recommended a symbolic 3 percent raise for the council. It was turned down along with the increase recommended for the mayor.

2008: The year for a community dialogue

Again this year we recommended a minimal pay raise, identical to the one recommended two years ago.

We are remarkably fortunate in the quality of our local elected officials. Their commitment to public service and to Ann Arbor is wonderful. However, at some point, maybe even now, the high time demands and low salary levels of these positions may present too high an economic barrier to many individuals interested in serving the community. The need to support a family usually requires a full-time job, often two full-time workers, leaving very little time for community involvement. The residents of Ann Arbor lose when less than everyone is engaged.

We are most pleased that the council has accepted our recommendation for a 3 percent raise in each of the next two years for itself and for the mayor.

We encourage you to write to your council members thanking them for accepting this raise and urging them to be open to a dialogue on the role of the council and the mayor in our community. With your engagement, let's start the process of moving the pay for our elected leaders to be more in line with the responsibilities they shoulder.

Finally, we also welcome your responses to this Other Voices piece. We encourage you as citizens of one of the world's exemplary cities to commit yourselves to a dialogue over the next few weeks and months so that we all can become more aware of the critical role these people play in our community.

We look forward to the dialogue.

About the writers: Bill Lockwood and Martha Darling are members of the Ann Arbor Local Officers Compensation Commission, which makes pay and benefits recommendations for the mayor and City Council.

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Record Number: 0417281911

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