

Ann Arbor District Library Archives: http://docs.newsbank.com.research.aadl.org/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:NewsBank:AARB&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=11E34BF3917062D0&svc_dat=InfoWeb:aggdocs&req_dat=519DF7EE1D214A8B8FD519C2631EDBAD

City needs officials motivated by desire to serve, not money

Ann Arbor News (MI) - Sunday, January 13, 2008

Author: *Michael Reid*

On Dec. 30 in The Ann Arbor News, Local Officers Compensation Committee members Bill Lockwood and Martha Darling opined that the massive pay hikes awarded to the mayor and City Council members four years ago and the more recent inflationary adjustments were not only deserved, but in fact necessary.

In my view, the logic behind this argument is buttressed by two equally questionable assumptions. First, that higher salary is a necessary requirement to entice qualified individuals into seeking office, and second, that the complexity of the job and the magnitude of the city budget warrants movement towards establishing a professional class of local politicians. I respectfully disagree on both counts.

Let's be upfront about one thing: Both the mayor and City Council members work hard and take their responsibilities seriously. We almost can't pay them enough for what they do. The twice-monthly council meetings frequently run past 11 p.m. and occasionally, well into the early hours of the morning. Committee meetings and constituent services (whether in the form of neighborhood gatherings, returning phone calls, or simply answering e-mails) also consume a fair measure of time. Add to that the burden of running a biennial campaign and it is easy to understand why the tenure of locally elected officials rarely lasts more than a decade.

What's also true is that candidates clearly understand these expectations in advance of seeking elected office and traditionally have been motivated by a genuine sense of public service, not financial gain or employment. In short, this form of public service is best described as moonlighting.

To my ear, the argument that increased compensation is necessary to draw a broader spectrum of citizens into the political arena rings hollow. We need look no further than our Board of Education, Washtenaw Community College trustees, library board or the University of Michigan Board of Regents to appreciate that individuals from many professional, cultural and economic walks of life willingly step forward in service to the community with little to no compensation.

To say the complexities or time commitment required to provide independent oversight to these community institutions is radically different than what may be required for city government confers special status to elected city officials that simply is not warranted.

In many ways, movement toward higher pay along with an increasing expectation of a full-time commitment might also be counterproductive. Even if we doubled the mayor's salary to \$80,000, tripled the salary of council members to \$45,000, and added benefits, the resulting pay scales would equate to little more than an entry-level position for a recent college graduate. Sure, we might attract the occasional citizen with sufficient wealth and flexibility to take a leave of absence from his or her regular work assignment, but many middle class employees, small business owners and professionals that comprise the bulk of our citizenry would be unable to bear the economic risk of retreating back to entry level pay. This can only shrink the pool of qualified citizens willing or able to serve.

Our city charter specifies a strong administrator/weak mayor form of government. This means the city administrator serves as the de facto chief executive while the mayor and council members are charged with three principal responsibilities: 1) hire the city administrator, 2) hire the city attorney, and 3) approve a balanced annual budget. Everything else is optional.

For anyone unfamiliar with the city's budget process, nearly all of the heavy lifting is done by the city administrator, and to a lesser extent the chief financial officer and department heads. Once the mayor and council articulate tax policy (within the voter-approved millage rates) and offer guidance on things like hiring freezes or layoffs, responsibility for developing a comprehensive budget reverts to the administrator.

While there is almost always a little last-minute budget gamesmanship and posturing among individual council members, it frequently amounts to little more than window dressing for the difficult work already executed by city staff. Given the fact that total compensation for each of the professional city department heads exceeds \$100,000 per year, it is not unreasonable to ask if moving the mayor and council closer towards full-time employment will do anything to help ensure a better result for the community. I just don't think it will.

The city of Ann Arbor's gross annual budget presently comes in right around \$300 million each year. In rough numbers, the retirement system accounts for \$20 million, the Downtown Development Authority \$20 million, and the AATA \$10 million of the gross figure. These numbers are important because each of these municipal entities is also headed by its own professional full-time executive director and governed by an appointed board of trustees or directors.

Given the budgets and time commitments needed to effectively govern these bodies, should we not pay these directors too? What about the Planning Commission, whose members oversee millions in construction and development proposals and whose meetings last at least as long as the City Council's? Are any of these appointed volunteers any less "deserving" of paid compensation than those chosen by election? Where do we draw the line?

For decades, the (near) volunteer status of public service performed by the mayor and individual council members has served our community well. Like many that believe in a limited role of government, I am troubled by the progression from unpaid, to stipend, to part-time, to well, you get the picture. If we want to preserve an authentic town hall sense of local government, I think it is essential that the mayor and council members coming from among us remain motivated primarily by a sense of civic duty not by the prospect of employment.

For the rest of us, this requires some degree of vigilance over subtle policy changes that move us incrementally in a new direction. To be fair, the Local Officers Compensation Committee has made it abundantly clear in what direction they think we should be heading, and I applaud their willingness to vet these views in a public forum. Yet somehow I can't shake my sense of uneasiness when the only requirement for the salary recommendations of a committee appointed by the mayor to become settled policy is for the council to do nothing. Perhaps that should be part of our ongoing dialogue as well.

About the writer

Michael Reid, an Ann Arbor resident, is the president of Exchange Capital Management Inc. in Ann Arbor and a former City Council member. He is the immediate past chair of the Local

Development Finance Authority and continues to serve on the LDFA's board of directors.

To contribute essays to Other Voices, contact Mary Morgan, opinion editor, at 734-994-6605 or mmorgan@annarbornews.com.

Page: A14

Record Number: 0417306783

Copyright, 2008, The Ann Arbor News. All Rights Reserved.