

Melissa Noe

From: jsylbert@mac.com
Sent: Monday, March 10, 2014 8:45 AM
To: Town of Monterey
Subject: Police Dept. salaries.

Dear Select Board,

I would like to comment on the matter of the Police Chief and Sergeant's salary increases.

At the Finance Committee meeting of 2/6/14, the minutes read as follows:

"Next items were the raises recommended for the full time employees specifically the Police Chief and Sergeant which have the 2nd 1/2 of the recommended increase that wasn't given last year. Muriel reiterated her position that if the town gives any more money to any town employees the ones that should be considered first should be the Police Chief and the Sergeant since they were not given the full amount that was proposed last year which would've brought them to the middle range in salaries amongst the surrounding towns. Muriel feels it's incumbent upon the Town to keep their promises and honor this agreement. Stan agreed."

Before I comment on these minutes, I want to say, unequivocally, that Chief Backhaus is a superlative chief and is a great asset to Monterey. People sometimes complain that the police have little to do in this town, but having served with Chief Backhaus for ten years, I know why this seems to be true. The reason Monterey is such a safe place to live is because Chief Backhaus knows how to protect persons and property before crimes can occur. This is what you want from a Chief, and we're very lucky to have him. I would stand up and defend the Chief's record anytime, anywhere. I also imagine that after many years of flux, he must be glad to have stabilized the department. This is an achievement in itself.

Having said that, Monterey is a town of a certain size and requires protection services at an appropriate level.

The Egremont police chief, according to the Berkshire Eagle, is being paid \$65,000 for FY2014. He will be offered \$70,000 in FY15 "pending town meeting approval." But the police force in Egremont is quite a bit larger than in Monterey, and the department there is responsible for a much larger commercial and industrial base than Monterey.

The Lee police chief, according to the Berkshire Eagle, is being paid "just over \$70,000." But Lee has a population of 5,943 (6 times that of Monterey), has a total property valuation of \$881,460,258, and the Lee chief is responsible for a department of 28. (One Sergeant, 7 Patrolman, 12 Special officers, 2 Traffic officers, 1 Administrative assistant, and a Dispatch department of 5.)

There is simply no comparison between the size of the Lee police department and the Monterey police department, and therefore no comparison between the responsibilities of the two chiefs.

And yet the Select Board has "promised" the position a \$10,000 raise over two years plus a 2% COLA raise which will put the salary at \$70,500 plus 2%.

Additionally, both the Egremont and Lee police chief pay 25% of their health insurance premium, whereas the chief and sergeant in Monterey pay only 10%. This is equivalent to an additional \$3,000 in compensation, raising the Monterey police chief position's total compensation to thousands of dollars above both the Lee police chief and the Egremont police chief.

Also, I am confused by the statement that “Muriel feels it’s incumbent upon the Town to keep their promises and honor this agreement. Stan agreed.”

The taxpayers of Monterey have not promised anyone anything; only town officials and the ECAC, which is composed of employees, including the Police chief. Are Monterey voters obligated to keep a promise the Police chief made to himself? This conflict of interest alone is enough to discredit the ECAC and any recommendations on salaries it makes—and recommendations are not “promises” that must be honored in any case.

The larger problem here is that Muriel and Stan and other town officials seem to feel they are working for the employees and not for voters and taxpayers. Scott was quoted in the 2/15/13 minutes last year as saying this: “Scott stated right away that he was not in favor in trying to balance the budget on the backs of the employees.”

The irony of this statement is that the town budget is, in fact, made up primarily of employee compensation of one sort or another: salaries, health insurance, retirement, etc., especially if you include all the outsourced compensation that goes to contractors who work for the town. And if you add the school budget, 70% of that is also employee compensation.

Employee compensation, therefore, constitutes the vast majority of the town budget, and what the Select Board should be concerned with is not the problem of “trying to balance the budget on the backs of the employees,” but the problem of not hanging an financially irresponsible budget on the backs of the taxpayers.

This means providing the services the town needs at a competitive price, and that includes offering salaries and, especially, health insurance at a competitive cost. The town continues to pay way too much for employees’ health insurance, but the Select Board seems to feel it should do so while also offering too much in salaries. The combination of these two uncompetitive offerings means that employee compensation is being “unbalanced on the backs of taxpayers.”

Respectfully,
Jon

Jonathan Sylbert
=