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County workers ask for pay raise

By Kali Schumitz
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04/05/2006

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When members of the Fairfax County Employees Advisory Council organized a meeting to discuss concerns about pay, they were expecting 40 to 50 people to show up.

With just two days notice, between 400 and 500 attended, said Anita Baker, the council chair.

More than 100 demonstrated at the county government center Tuesday afternoon and even more turned out for the hearing on the county budget that evening, all wearing white shirts.

Employees have been saying for years that the county pay for performance system used to determine annual raises for general county employees (not teachers or public safety employees) is inadequate, according to Baker.

Compared to neighboring counties, Fairfax employees are just falling further and further behind, she said.

The average raise for county employees was 4.3 percent last year and is expected to be similar this year, while neighboring jurisdictions, including Loudoun and Prince William counties, are budgeting 5 to 7.5 percent raises for their staffs. Such differences have been accumulating over the past six years, increasing the disparity, Baker said.

Fairfax employees are up against a tough fight, as teachers and some non-police public safety employees are looking for pay increases as well, while taxpayers are demanding that the county's real estate tax rate, the main source of county revenue, be lowered as much as possible.

Those seeking tax cuts think county employees are overpaid. Arthur Purves, president of the Fairfax County Taxpayers Alliance, claimed at a budget hearing Monday that the average salary increase for county employees over the past few years is 40 percent higher than the private-sector average.

Supervisors have requested more information about employee compensation to try and address the concerns as they work through the budget process.

A complex message

Under the current system, county employees can receive an annual raise between zero and 6 percent, depending on their performance. The average is 4.3 percent.

But Baker said that can vary between departments. Ten departments have an average increase of 4 percent or less, she said.

However, the biggest problem, Baker said, is with the pay scale.

Each year, the pay scale is increased to reflect inflation and competition with other jurisdictions. But current employees never see that increase.

Because the scale is increasing rapidly to match the cost of living, Baker said, current employees can end up earning the same or less than new hires.

One social worker with Child Protective Services told Baker that she has been working for the county for three years and now earns \$42,600. If she gets a 6-percent raise, the highest possible, she will earn \$45,156, which is about \$650 less than a new hire in her position would make, starting in July.

The way the scale is now, you will never get to the top, Baker said.

Employees would like an across-the-board pay increase in the 2007 budget and would like a comprehensive review of the system before the 2008 budget.


Were not asking for much, said Linda Stetzer, a 22-year Park Authority employee. We just want things to be fair across the board.

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New employees leave, older employees feel stuck

Employees who have worked for Fairfax County for decades say they feel like they are stuck staying where they are because of the retirement benefits.

But younger employees are leaving after just a few years with the county, Baker and others said, because many live in outlying counties anyway and can now get the same salary without commuting.

Pay for performance has gone from being innovative to a system that lowers morale, said Daria Parnes, of the public library employees association.

This will cost the county in many ways, not just financially, she said.

For employees like Stetzer, it is a struggle to keep living in Fairfax County, where she grew up. Her pay raises have not been keeping up with increases in her living expenses, she said, particularly with higher gas prices and rising real estate taxes.

Employees' share of insurance benefits have also gone up, she said, which reduces how much of her last raise she actually saw in her paycheck.

It wouldnt do me any good to just pick up and leave, she said, because she would lose her retirement benefits.

I used to be very, very proud to work for Fairfax County, Stetzer said. Now, she feels the cost of living here is pushing the little people out.

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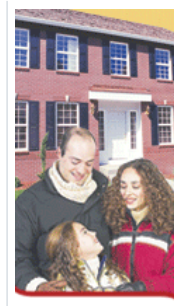
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