

## Windfall in wee hours: 40% raises

The St. Petersburg City Council gives itself a big raise. Some worry about the repercussions.

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ST. PETERSBURG - It was after midnight and the City Council had been meeting virtually nonstop for almost 10 hours.

The council chamber was nearly empty. The television news crews had left. But the council still hadn't taken up the issue guaranteed to generate the most controversy: **voting themselves and Mayor Rick Baker a pay raise.**

Finally, at **12:50 a.m.**, council members **voted unanimously** to increase the mayor's salary from \$113,644 to \$150,000. But they weren't finished.

In the final minutes of their **last meeting of the year**, without any public debate and by a 4-3 vote, council members gave themselves raises of more than 40 percent, more than the amount recommended by a committee earlier in the week.

"We haven't heard the last about this pay raise," said council member Bill Foster, one of three members who voted against the increase. "People are going to be distancing themselves from this vote for years."

Also voting against the increase was chairman Rick Kriseman and council member Jay Lasita, who will be forced out by term limits in January. **Council members James Bennett, John Bryan, Rene Flowers and Earnest Williams voted for the increase.**

The eighth council member, Virginia Littrell, who also is leaving office in January, left the meeting before the vote.

Starting next year, council members will get \$38,000 plus a \$150 monthly expense allowance. Their current salary is \$27,316, with the same \$150 allowance.

The raises were prompted by an annual salary survey conducted by internal services director **Mike Connors**, who found local officials **made much less than those in several other large Florida cities.**

**Connors** recommended a range of salaries based on the amount made in other cities and Pinellas County. A council committee that met earlier this week settled on \$150,000 for the mayor and \$37,000 for council members.

But at Thursday's meeting, council member Flowers ignored the committee's recommendation and proposed a council salary of \$44,420, the amount suggested earlier this year by the Council of Neighborhood Associations.

**Bryan** seconded Flowers' motion. Then the members fell silent.

Nobody spoke for several seconds until Foster said quietly, "Please don't do this."

The motion was defeated, 4-3. Williams, Bryan and Flowers voted for the higher amount.

Next Lasita proposed the committee's \$37,000 recommendation. Again the council was silent.

Then **Bryan** said, "I move for a salary of \$38,000."

Lasita shook his head.

This time, Lasita was out-voted.

Afterward, he said he was disappointed.

But others said the higher salary was justified. While it is considered a part-time job, council members typically put in long hours and frequently attend events after business hours and on weekends.

"I think we should pay all elected officials an appropriate dollar amount based upon their responsibility," **Williams** said. "And it's a lot of responsibility."

Unlike years past, the proposed raises generated little public outcry. There was only one angry letter at City Hall. No one spoke against the raises during Thursday's open forum, the portion of the meeting when citizens can discuss city-related business.

Kriseman said it was bad timing, not a deliberate act, that caused the council to vote on the raises in the wee hours of the morning. The issue was scheduled during the early part of the meeting but other issues took longer than expected. So the raises were moved to the end of the agenda.

But **Foster** said he thinks there will be a big price to pay.

"That's a 40 percent raise that occurred by a stroke of a vote overnight," he said. "I think that's almost an unprecedented move by a legislative body anywhere."