



COUNTY OF ERIE CITIZENS SALARY REVIEW COMMISSION MINUTES

Tuesday, February 20, 2024 Meeting #8

Present: Chair Lauri Buonanno, Alex Burgos, Gary Dickson, David Pietrowski, Christopher Stone, Fred Floss (virtual), and Bill Ransom.

Absent: Greg Rabb and Mark Glasgow

Support Staff: Mark Cornell, Lindsay McKay, and Natalie Nitsche.

Non-Members Present:

Meeting Notes: A quorum was present, and the meeting was called to order by Chair Buonanno at 2:00 p.m.

Chair Buonanno discussed the prior meeting's minutes. C. Stone motioned to accept the minutes as amended; A. Burgos seconded the motion. All in favor.

Chair Buonanno asked if any of the Committee members had anything they would like to share and/or discuss the Buffalo News coverage of the past Salary Commissions.

Next, Chair Buonanno suggested discussing the Committee members' ideas for the Commission's report. D. Pietrowski advised he has this year's budget numbers for the elected officials and their deputies. The first document reviewed by the Commission shows the salaries from 1996 through 2018 salaries, and the 2024 salaries after the Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs) as well as the percentage of increase. Chair Buonanno described her calculations and formulas used on the spreadsheet on the Google Drive. There is also a calculation on the spreadsheet for the average recommendation for each elected official which is the mean number of all of the individual Commission members. These percentages are quite high compared to the past Commissions (per Buffalo News articles).

Chair Buonanno then discussed the City of Buffalo's Salary Review Commission's recommendations for Common Council and the executive elected officials. The vote did not appear to be unanimous by the Common Council. Per the Buffalo News article, some Common Council members felt it was too soon for a raise after their 2019 raises. A. Burgos believes that four members voted "yes," three members voted "no," and one abstained from voting but does not remember the exact count.

C. Stone asked if there was a lawsuit about the City's Salary Review Commission's recommendations. M. Cornell advised there is a lawsuit, however, the raises still went into effect.

Chair Buonanno suggested to the Commission that the history of Salary Review Commission should be on the record. She and Bill were both on the 2014 Commission. The 2024 recommendations are not modest in comparison to the past Commissions.

D. Pietrowski then discussed the outdated information available through New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC). The updated numbers M. Cornell was able to locate were similar. M. Cornell advised he would update the spreadsheet. Ultimately, with updated numbers, Erie County was lowered in comparison to its peers. D. Pietrowski advised that, if looking at the total cost of government, Erie County is the second lowest in the State. He then discussed the other columns: total cost of legislators and if other counties only had 11 legislators, what their salaries would be. Chair Buonanno asked if there were any questions.

C. Stone discussed the fact that per legislator, the number of constituents per district is high. D. Pietrowski confirmed that Erie County Legislators have the highest number of constituents in the State. B. Ransom asked if the Commission has been able to determine the workload of the staff and the number of staffers. M. Cornell stated that information may not be quantifiable, and there are about 30 staff members.

M. Cornell presented a document he prepared comparing the Big Five counties along with the City of Buffalo for their total Legislative budget. Chair Buonanno suggested, preliminarily, comparing just the Big Four counties. M. Cornell stated that the other three counties in the Big Four spend a larger percentage of their legislative budget on their Legislators' salaries than Erie County. Chair Buonanno suggested that Erie County spends a larger percentage on their staff, which may be a proxy for workload.

D. Pietrowski discussed that Erie County is low for salaries, and if raises are only given to 11 people, it is a miniscule change to the budget. Chair Buonanno suggested that if property taxes increase, raises cannot go into effect. M. Cornell confirmed that the Charter was amended about a decade ago by the Charter Review Commission.

Chair Buonanno asked the Commission to individually state which analysis is most important—each person prefaced their first cut recommendations with an explanation, but did not specify the analysis number. Chair Buonanno then stated she is trying to see if the Commission can settle on one, two or three combined analyses. No vote can take place today as three members are not present, which is not usual. One had an emergency, one is ill, and one is teaching a class.

M. Cornell drafted a salary projection into the future years to display how the current CPI format may materialize in the future years. In 2025, there will be a 3.4% increase given there are no changes with this Committee. In 2025, the County Executive will make \$144,690; the Comptroller will make \$110,803; the Sheriff will make \$105,273; the Clerk will make \$93,193; and the Legislature would remain static. There is also a projection for 2026, 2027, and 2028 based on a 3% COLA.

D. Pietrowski asked if, in 2018, there was a tour of the table? Chair Buonanno stated that they did go around the room, and only one of the members wanted a substantial increase. That member was looking at the deputies' salaries and was potentially responsible for the COLA. There had been a discussion about matching the CSEA Collective Bargaining Unit. C. Stone asked if CSEA is averaging a 3% increase every year, and Chair Buonanno confirmed that. Since the last Commission, Erie County's median income and real estate have increased substantially. Right now, the Big Four County Executive is \$161,000; the Sheriff is \$134,000; the County Clerk is \$102,000; the Comptroller is \$114,000; and the Legislator base is \$32,000 with the Chair at \$51,000, and the caucus leaders at \$39,000. These numbers are available online.

D. Pietrowski asked Chair Buonanno to confirm the Big Four Counties. Chair Buonanno stated: Albany, Erie, Onondaga, and Monroe. D. Pietrowski expressed concern about how different the populations are: Erie County is at 925,000; Albany is at 309,000; Monroe is at 747,000; and Onondaga is at 465,000. M. Cornell stated that Erie County is a middle ground between the large counties and the somewhat similar but smaller counties. C. Stone contributed that there are similarities in that there are urban centers as well as rural parts. Chair Buonanno stated that Monroe County's Citizen Salary Review Commission, which is seated by a resolution from the Legislature and is not mandated by its Charter, increased pay significantly. The salaries had not increased in almost 20 years. The County Executive went from \$120,000 to \$180,000; the Sheriff went from \$149,000 to \$175,000; Clerk from \$81,000 to \$115,000; the Comptroller is not an elected position; the Legislature went from \$18,000 to \$28,500; the Legislature Chair went from \$36,000 to \$45,000; and the stipend for the caucus chairs went from \$5,000 to \$7,500. Monroe County used the same analyses we did, including our 2018 report. Chair Buonanno also stated that, based on M. Cornell's salary predictions based on projected CPI, Erie County's elected officials' salaries will continue to be much lower than Monroe County.

Chair Buonanno then discussed the similarities and differences between Erie County and Monroe County: hospitals and sports teams. Erie County and Monroe County both have urban, suburban, and rural areas. Geographically, both counties are considered to be in Western New York. Monroe County does seem the most comparable. Chair Buonanno then stated she is trying to reconcile average salaries of the Big Four and only Monroe County along with a COLA for the Legislature. If she was to give a recommendation now, she would average the Big Four with Monroe County and add a COLA for the Legislature and a substantial raise for the Chair (around \$20,000).

D. Pietrowski stated he did not feel prepared to give the numbers he did during the prior meeting. He suggested giving the members an opportunity to do research and prepare the reasoning. Chair Buonanno stated that it was clearly indicated that the prior numbers given were just a first cut. C. Stone stated that in 2018, there was a round robin where everyone tried to convince each other until a consensus was reached.

M. Cornell discussed that each methodology and/or analysis is not going to be perfect. "Don't let the pursuit of the perfect be the enemy of the good in this case." The Big Four may or may not be the best comparison, but it is the best comparison to, a degree, that we have. Everyone should formulate their own observations and prorate numbers based on that. Ultimately, there is no right or wrong answer.

F. Floss stated that there are both vertical and horizontal ways to make comparisons. Comparing to the Big Four is horizontal or few can compare over time. For example, the COLA, when do you want to start comparing the COLA. Some of the groups did not get as much of a COLA as the others because of elections. Chair Buonanno stated that equalization is Analysis 8.

Chair Buonanno suggested determining reasonable salaries first and the rest should be relatively easy to adjust salaries accordingly. A discussion about equalizing the County Clerk ensued. COLAs were not recommended for the Legislature, because, in 2018, their salaries were four standard deviations above the mean. That has changed; now it is 2.5 standard deviations above the mean. F. Floss stated this is only a horizontal comparison. In real dollars their salary is now lower than in 2018. Chair Buonanno stated that a vertical comparison is Analysis 3. In this analysis, the County Executive should make \$191,000; the Sheriff should make \$146,000; the Comptroller should make \$149,000; the Clerk should make \$146,000; Caucus leaders should make \$88,000; Legislators at \$78,000; and the Chair at \$97,000.

Next, Chair Buonanno listed her perceptions of which members emphasized which Analyses: F. Floss- Analysis 3; Chair Buonanno-Analyses 1 and 2; D. Pietrowski-Analyses 2, 4, and 5; A. Burgos-Analysis 2 and 7. Monroe County was very clear about which analyses they used the most. Erie County's Commission can choose not to do this.

Chair Buonanno suggested that next time the Commission meets, there should be a vote. There may not be unanimity, but majority rules.

F. Floss stated that his position is horizontal and vertical comparisons should be done. It makes little to no sense to tell Legislators they will never get a raise even though everyone else is getting one. There is a concern that this position will not attract the variety and complexity of individuals that make up a good County Legislature. That is not saying the current Legislators are not strong or good representatives, it means that moving forward, as the County becomes more diverse, the Legislature has more diverse voices. Diversity does not just mean race or gender but also includes culture and income levels. We want to make sure those folks are able to afford to run if they so choose. Chair Buonanno stated that if you look at Analyses 1 and 3, the County Executive's salary is \$176,231.50. That is just an average that needs to be calculated down the line.

Chair Buonanno then suggested that the Commission take a little break to think about their analyses and come up with calculations.

Next, Chair Buonanno asked if anyone else would like to discuss their leanings.

C. Stone stated that he is leaning toward Analysis 1 figures.

M. Cornell observed that the group seems to be struggling with which route to take. There are two options to look at. One is that each person makes their case for their own methodology, and the second is averaging the numbers come up by everyone. The second option may be the easiest way to compromise.

D. Pietrowski discussed the disparity between the elected officials' and the deputies' salaries.

Chair Buonanno asked the Commission members to read through the Analyses and come up with numbers for the second cut.

G. Dickson expressed concern about what is acceptable to the public. Erie County elected officials are not in competition with the other counties' elected officials, as far as salary is concerned. The public is not getting 20%-30% pay raises. G. Dickson proposed looking at the percentages: a 5% pay raise for the County Executive; 95% of that figure should be the Sheriff's salary; 90% of the Executive's salary would be the Comptroller's and Clerk's salaries. No one will have to worry again about them being out of whack. Chair Buonanno advised percentage increase is another analysis that will have to be added. A discussion on percentages from 1996 to 2018 to 2024.

B. Ransom said he would like to move away from the past. The elected officials got raises. The raises being presented for the 2024 Commission are not practical. The Commission would be crucified if they voted to increase salaries by 30%-40%. The deputies' salaries should not be a factor; they are paid differently. That gap is not going to be closed, it never will be. Based on B. Ransom's methodology, the Legislature would be looking at 5.7% increase. Chair Buonanno stated that this is a COLA analysis (Analyses 7 and 8).

A. Burgos stated that he would like to equalize the Sheriff, Comptroller, and Clerk due to the duties they perform and the information provided in their interviews. They can be equalized a little more with the County Executive. A. Burgos also stated that he remains constant with the Legislature suggestions he made. He believes the Legislators are grossly underpaid based on the complexity of their job, the fulltime status of the job, and the need to attract qualified candidates. The Chairwoman of the Legislature is likely going to the Senate. Who will inherit that work? A. Burgos believes that someone who is ready to take on the county-wide, complex work should receive pay that is comparable to their skill set and career sectors. D. Pietrowski asked if there any differences between the Comptroller, Clerk, and Sheriff. If the Comptroller was asked why he thinks he deserves a raise, what will the answer? C. Stone stated that during the Sheriff's interview, the Sheriff indicated that only the County Executive and the Sheriff have 24/7 jobs, and, in the event of an emergency, the Clerk's offices close down and the Comptroller isn't necessarily needed.

B. Ransom stated that most people who come into these rolls are looking to move on to bigger and better government positions. That has been the trend. Good people are being elected. B. Ransom believes that those running for Legislature know what the income is, and most of them have additional income-it is a position for those looking to move on. A. Burgos stated he believes it should not be a stepping stone position. It should be a position where underserved populations in the County get consistent representation. D. Pietrowski stated that, during the majority caucus interview, there was not one person present who was present for the 2018 interview. Is that the reason?

Chair Buonanno stated that, based on her research of County government, the Legislators are supposed to be closest to the people. If they are closest to the people, they cannot do it for 20 years. They bring their ideas, do this for a little while, and then they go back to being a citizen. That is what I was taught about how County government should work. Erie County has a lot of work to do and still has some recovering to do after the horrendous events of the 1970s and 1980s. She understands the perspective of having a career politician that is in the position for a long enough time to do the work that needs to be done to bring us back, but does not know if a county-level elected official has that kind of power. Chair Buonanno also stated that if she was on a Charter Commission, she would want citizens to discuss what they want the Legislator position to do and be, but she is not. She is on the Salary Review Commission.

F. Floss believes that the purpose of a Citizen Salary Commission, from a theoretical standpoint, salaries need to be adjusted from time to time to be fair. No Legislature is going to vote for a salary increase, because citizens believe everyone but them is making too much money. The political system is broken, and this Commission is a way to come up with something that is fair. The Commission should do what they think is right, not whether or not the citizens of the County would vote yes or no to it.

Chair Buonanno suggested discussing future business of upcoming meetings. G. Dickson recommended meeting on February 27th and voting. F. Floss advised he was able to be present on the 27th, however, C. Stone cannot be present. C. Stone is willing to go with the majority. Chair Buonanno stated that the agenda for next week will be going around to give (presumably) numbers for the final cut and the explanation. The Commission may need one more meeting to discuss the final report. G. Dickson suggested scheduling an additional meeting that can be cancelled if it is not necessary.

A future meeting was discussed for March. Chair Buonanno and F. Floss are not available for March 5, 2024. A meeting will be scheduled for March 12, 2024. The plan will be to vote on the 27th and March 12th will be reserved for the final report.

There were no public comments.

A motion was made by A. Burgos to adjourn the meeting; motion was seconded by C. Stone. All in favor.

The next meeting will be held on February 27, 2024 at 2:00 p.m.