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RAISING SOME QUESTIONS

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On July 14 the Daily News in Los Angeles reported that Glendale city council members voted to approve for themselves the "council's first raise in 20 years." The officials did this by crafting this week an ordinance that will be formally voted on next week. Councilman Bob Yousefian was quoted in the story saying, "We waited 20 years to do this." The same day, the unofficial newspaper of record for Glendale offered readers a similar story, following up on a report it published a day earlier. The Glendale News Press declared the council was weighing a proposal that "would grant members their first raise in nearly 20 years."

Given these reports, all of which focused on public servants selflessly going almost two decades without boosting their own pay, many readers might have concluded Glendale's city council members haven't had a raise in 20 years. Obviously, both from the report presented by city staff at this week's meeting, and based upon statements at the meeting wherein the idea was discussed, that's exactly what Glendale's City Hall wants you to believe.

How many will be stunned to learn it isn't true? Council members voted to increase their own pay by more than 60% in May, 2002, and that vote involved four of the five officials in office today.

Sure, if you want to play word games rivaling those of a former President who debated the meaning of the word "is," or if you want to split a hair thinner than those on Karl Rove's head, there is a way to make the city's claims - and the newspapers' reflexive regurgitation - correct. The 2002 vote increased compensation for members of the Glendale Redevelopment Agency. But that body is made up of the five council members, and the GRA's meetings take place immediately before, after and simultaneous to council meetings. A seat on the GRA is a function of election to the city council.

The 2002 raise took the annual income for those serving as council members from \$19,908 per year to \$32,800 per year. That's including "meeting stipends" received for serving simultaneously as council members and redevelopment agency members. It also includes the "car allowance" the elected officials receive, which for years before 2002 was used to give council members steady pay raises without the public ever becoming wise to the scam. No one in City Hall

wanted to attract the public's attention by voting to increase compensation. Instead, the so-called car allowance was quietly raised year after year.

By 2002 car allowances for council members had climbed to \$739 per month. Council members routinely made self-effacing jokes about making just \$800 a month, a reference to their per-meeting stipend, unashamed at failing to mention they were actually receiving almost double that thanks to the bogus allowance. The public was generally unaware elected officials got a car allowance - and none of them advertised it - until I broke the story. Then, resentment festered through an election cycle or two, a few candidates pledged not to accept the funds, and the controversy snowballed.

What was effectively a slush fund was finally "slashed" to \$399 per month as part of that 2002 raise. (Note: The Mayor receives a higher car allowance, currently \$600 per month, and other more delicate bumps in stipends to reflect the additional time a Mayor is expected to put in through his or her year of service. As former Mayor Gus Gomez ably demonstrated, the pay increases don't actually compel an increase in service. Throughout this column, when referring to payments per meeting, per month or annually, I'm not including the slight increases Mayor's enjoy.)

The loss from cutting the car allowance was more than made up for when the council boosted what they're paid for attending GRA meetings. The rate went from \$30 per GRA meeting to \$350 per meeting. Moreover, they also decided to pay themselves for working on another panel they automatically take seats on as council members, the Housing Authority. They decided to pay themselves \$200 each month for those roles.

Based upon this week's session and reading subsequent news reports, many Glendalians might believe their selfless public servants have merely voted to hoist their annual income from a piteous \$800 per month to a lowly \$1,100 per month. Oh, and there may be a \$50 boost in the car allowance, so perhaps the new rate of pay is \$1,150 per month.

In fact, they're set to approve a hike from the \$32,800 they're entitled to receive annually today, to \$37,000.



Glendale councilman, GRA member and airport commissioner Dave Weaver. Everything's coming up roses.

Dare I even mention the cash some members receive for serving on other panels as part of their council duties? The most obvious examples are Dave Weaver and Bob Yousefian, each of whom recently assumed seats representing Glendale on the panel overseeing the Bob Hope Airport. That brings in as much as \$1,275 per month, putting the potential annual income up to \$52,300. Not bad for "part-time" council members who have been otherwise unemployed since shortly after they took office.

Also remember that we haven't even touched on other benefits relished by council members, including an amazing health insurance plan. They enjoy the

"executive" package, which effectively pays for anything and everything, including dental and vision. It's no coincidence that virtually every council member in recent years who has gone most of their life wearing glasses has suddenly, shortly after taking office, undergone laser surgery and was freed from the tyranny of spectacles. And there hasn't been a one of them who enjoyed benefits like that at the jobs they held before being elected.

Look, do I think \$52,300 and primo insurance, or even just \$37,000 and primo insurance, is too much to pay community leaders responsible for over seeing a city of 200,000 with budgets that total hundreds of millions of dollars? Well, it kinda depends on the council member. Still, I'm sure many voters who would have no problem with such a proposal. Indeed, council salaries are finally getting close to where they will have to be to allow someone other than just the wealthy, the retired or the corrupt to be able to afford to hold office.

But let's put things in perspective. During the pay raise talks in 2002, Yousefian kept making the point that "even city custodians" are paid more than council members. Aside from the obvious rebuttal Yousefian's critics might offer (that custodians deserve more), his rationale ignores that a council office is supposedly a privilege, a selfless service to the community, and one each and every holder of the seat asked for.

Moreover, there's no question council members are paid much more than the city's lifeguards, in whose hands we literally place lives. How about the city's reserve police officers, a noble and hardworking band who pay for much of their own training and equipment, and who work long hours and put their lives on the line with no pay virtually every day of the year?

The council member can decide when he'll put in five hours in a week, or 40. The custodian doesn't have a choice. And in my personal experience, custodians complain a lot less about the burdens of their work. No one arranges special parking for them, and they're rarely invited to banquets and dinners held to honor them. Custodians, lifeguards and reserve police officers don't see their names engraved on every brass plaque erected in the city.

Let's also remind council members of the literally hundreds of people in the community who contribute time, energy and brain power to good causes without receiving ANY compensation, to say nothing of a car allowance. Do board members for the Red Cross, Boy Scouts and so many other groups whine that they should be compensated for helping to run such vital organizations? In fact, many board members for local community groups actually have to contribute \$5,000 or more to the given cause every year in order to hold the seat.



Councilman Bo Yousefian. STILL making MUCH less than many who contributed to his campaign.

But again, I can also buy into some arguments for paying council members a decent wage, both so that a broader variety of citizens can pursue the office, and to reduce the incentives for chiseling and corruption. I admit to ambivalence. But in the end, the balanced scale in my mind is finally tilted in opposition to pay raises because these would be going to officials who have clearly chosen not to tell the whole truth about what they're doing, and who have allowed City Hall to mislead the public.
