

Council targets about \$284,000 in employee pay increases

By Courtney H ughett Brown County Democrat

Brown County Council members are working toward a 2027 employee pay plan that would add about \$284,000 in wages, with additional benefit costs on top of that amount, as they try to raise some of the county's lowest wages without putting employees who are already paid more under the new system back down.

The council spent much of its Oct. 1 work session going through employee salaries one job at a time using the county's new Factor Evaluation System, or FES. The system compares Brown County jobs with similar jobs in other counties and places them into categories based on the work and responsibilities involved.

The county's long-term goal is to eventually pay jobs at 100 percent of the outside midpoint identified in the wage study. Council members said last Thursday that reaching 100 percent in 2027 would add about \$888,371 in wages alone, which the county cannot afford.

Instead, members agreed to continue working with a target of 90 percent of the outside midpoint. Based on the current figures, that would add approximately \$284,000 in wages. The numbers still have to be checked against payroll records before the council adopts them.

The cost does not increase evenly from 90 percent to 100 percent because many employees already earn more than the 90 percent target and would receive no increase at that level, but would become eligible for an increase if the county moved all the way to 100 percent of the outside midpoint.

Later in the meeting, officials estimated benefits and payroll-related expenses at roughly 28 percent above wages, although the amount varies by employee. Earlier calculations using 30 percent put the total additional cost of the proposed raises at roughly \$369,000.

Council members gave direction to keep the wage increase itself below \$300,000 as the final salary ordinance is prepared.

Employees whose current salaries are already higher than the 90 percent figure would not have their pay reduced. They would remain at their current salary until the new pay scale eventually catches up with them.

The proposal would also produce larger increases for some of the county's lower-paid positions. Council members said many jail employees, for example, would receive increases of about \$3,000 under the current calculations.

Council President Darren Byrd said the goal is to stop making individual salary decisions differently from one department to another. "I do not want to deviate on anything again from what we're doing because the goal that we're trying to get to is a standardized rate for the county that we can rely on that's fair to the employees and fair to the county and fair to the taxpayers," Byrd said.

The council also included elected officials and chief deputies in its calculations instead of leaving those positions outside the review. Chief deputies are being calculated at 85 percent of the salary of the elected official they serve under. Some positions would receive increases, while others are already above the proposed level and would remain where they are.

Another major discussion involved the Health Department and the county's difficulty finding an experienced septic inspector.

Health Officer Dr. Michael Conway said Tiffany Petit, who was hired and trained as an assistant environmental health specialist, is moving into a full environmental health specialist position vacated by a retirement. That move is a promotion into an existing position, not the creation of another job.

The department still needs a third environmental employee. Those employees handle work involving septic systems, food inspections and the county's large number of pools and hot tubs.

Council members spent considerable time sorting through the job descriptions because some positions appeared to be classified differently even though officials believed they had similar duties. Conway was asked to review the descriptions again so the county can determine whether the jobs are classified correctly before advertising or setting salaries.

The bigger problem is finding someone who can step immediately into septic work. Conway said it can take at least a year to train someone with little experience.

He told the council the department recently had an applicant who already does septic inspection work for another southern Indiana county and would move to Brown County for \$55,000 per year.

Brown County's current pay structure does not allow the department to offer that amount for the existing position.

The proposed 90 percent level for the PAT-A classification discussed by the council would be about \$51,000. Members said they do not want to move one job to a higher classification merely to reach a desired salary. The duties and qualifications of the position must support the classification under the FES system.

At the same time, several council members said the septic inspector position has become particularly important because delays affect homeowners, builders and housing construction. Septic approval is one of the steps that must be completed before some other building approvals can move forward.

Council member Scott Rudd said he has heard more concern from builders, septic installers and homeowners about that position than almost any other county staffing issue over the past year.

The council did not change the position's pay Thursday. Conway was asked to review the job descriptions and make sure they accurately reflect what an experienced septic inspector is actually required to know and do. The council will then continue considering the salary as part of the larger pay discussion.

County employees also returned to the ongoing dispute over the commissioners' decision to end paid lunches for some employees beginning Nov. 1.

Many courthouse employees currently work from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and receive an hour paid lunch. Although their salary is calculated as a 40-hour week, employees said they are actually working 35 hours during those office hours.

Under the new personnel policy, employees would receive a halfhour unpaid lunch. If the existing 40-hour salary calculation remains unchanged, employees said they would have to come in a half-hour early or remain a half-hour later each day to receive the same paycheck.

Employees asked the council to change the number of hours used to calculate their salary so their annual pay would not fall and they would not have to extend their day merely because lunch becomes unpaid.

Council members repeatedly said they do not want employees to receive less pay.

Council member Rudd said requiring employees to work additional hours for the same annual salary amounts to a lower hourly rate.

The complication is that the commissioners control the personnel policy, while the council controls salaries and the number of hours used to calculate them. Changing from a 40-hour week to 37½ or 35 hours would raise the hourly rate while leaving annual salary unchanged. It could also affect overtime, compensatory time, vacation and other benefits, so members said they need advice from the county's compensation consultant and attorney before making a decision.

The timing is also an issue. The new policy is scheduled to begin Nov. 1, only two months before the end of the year. Changing the calculation before then could require the council to amend the 2026 salary ordinance.

The council scheduled another work session for 1:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 8, and plans to invite representatives from Waggonner, Irwin, Scheele & Associates and the county attorney to help resolve the work-hour issue before the Nov. 1 change takes effect. The council also made two changes to the proposed 2027 budget Thursday. Members agreed to remove \$100,000 that had been included in the Parks and Recreation budget for ball field lighting because tourism funding is expected to cover that expense. They also reduced a \$400,000 employee attrition line to \$300,000.

Those changes reduce the amount the county would otherwise have to cover from its reserves.

Commissioner Kevin Patrick also asked for permission for the highway department to offer \$25 an hour for temporary, on-call snowplow drivers with commercial driver's licenses. The current temporary rate is \$21.50.

The county has 12 snow routes and normally has one regular driver for each route. Temporary drivers would be used when a regular driver is unavailable during a snow or ice event. Based on prior use, the department estimated up to 80 hours at \$25 per hour, or a maximum of about \$2,000.

The council was receptive to the proposal but did not approve the new rate Thursday. An ordinance will have to be prepared for a future meeting.

Council members also said they plan to continue doing more budget and salary analysis internally rather than automatically sending the work to Reedy Financial. Officials said the county still sees a role for Reedy on specialized financial and legislative issues, but believes routine calculations and reports can increasingly be handled by county staff and existing software, reducing outside consulting costs.