

## County Council pauses on salary ordinance amid budget concerns

By Courtney H ughett Brown County Democrat

The Brown County Council spent almost two hours Tuesday evening, Feb. 17, discussing employee compensation, internal financial controls, election outreach, and long-term budget planning.

Early in the meeting, council members discussed meeting procedures and how votes should be conducted going forward. Members agreed to generally use voice votes and show-of-hands voting, with roll calls used when necessary so the clerk can clearly document votes in the minutes.

The longest discussion of the night centered on the salary ordinance and the Factor Evaluation System, which the county adopted to create a more consistent method for evaluating positions and setting pay ranges. The Factor Evaluation System is a jobclassification tool that assigns numerical values to positions based on duties, experience requirements, supervision, and working conditions to help standardize employee compensation.

Council member Jim Kemp said he believes the council has not yet spent enough time reviewing the system and understanding its financial impact. “We as a council body have never had a three-hour discussion focused specifically on this factor evaluation system and the entire labor cost of the county,” Kemp said, referring to the council’s three-hour work sessions held once a month.

Kemp said labor costs and employee benefits total about \$11.5 million annually and represent the county’s largest expense. He also raised concerns about whether recent changes to job classifications or pay levels had increased costs without a full council review.

“I have no idea what our 2026 labor costs are projected to be,” Kemp said. “We are running a budget deficit for 2026. And we haven’t even got through February.”

Kemp said the council should take time to fully understand how compensation decisions affect the county’s general fund and long-term finances.

Council member Judy Swift-Powdrill, attending the meeting remotely, said she shared those concerns. “I feel really uncomfortable that a few people decided that there would be changes made without consulting the whole council,” Swift-Powdrill said.

She also questioned whether some positions had been changed from exempt to overtime- eligible classifications, which could increase payroll expenses and also cause conflict between employees who may also want overtime hours.

Swift-Powdrill said the council should rely on the consultants it hired to guide the process. “My suggestion is that we call WIS in again and we talk to them about office manager, office administrator, whatever those concerns are, and

let them work through it,” she said. “They’re the professionals. We are not.”

Council member Gary Huett said the county expected adjustments when it chose to implement the evaluation system and noted that the process is still being refined.

During the discussion, council members referenced earlier estimates showing that fully implementing recommended external pay targets could have increased labor costs by more than \$800,000. Instead, the county chose a more limited approach by adjusting positions that fell below internal benchmarks.

After extensive discussion, the council voted to table the salary ordinance and revisit it during their work session on March 5. Members said the work session will be used to review the FES system, recent classification changes, and the county's overall labor-cost picture in preparation for the 2027 budget cycle.

The council also discussed internal financial controls and the need to develop clearer policies for payroll, claims, and revenue processes. The discussion was tied to recent State Board of Accounts' audit findings and the council's goal of improving procedures moving forward.

Later in the meeting, the council approved a legal services agreement with attorney Susan Beevers. The agreement includes a \$20,000 spending cap, and any requests for legal services must be authorized by the council president, Darren Byrd. Council members said the limit could be revisited later if needed.

Council members also discussed community outreach about vote center changes ahead of the May primary election. The county plans to include information about voting locations and hours with property tax bills and on the county website, while the clerk's office works to identify ways to reach residents who may not receive tax bills directly, such as renters.

Toward the end of the meeting, council members discussed planning for the 2027 budget process, including the importance of establishing timelines for work sessions and gaining a clearer understanding of both revenue forecasts and spending projections earlier in the year.

Members emphasized that the county's budget process should focus on forecasting revenues and expenses accurately and making policy decisions early enough to avoid last-minute changes.