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October 13, 2023

Judge Bray Continues Salary Deception

Fiscal year 2023-24 began on October 1st and again the Blanco County Commissioners Court approved a salary deception that is in violation of state statutes. For several years Judge Bray has openly violated [Section 152.013\(b\)\(1\)\(2\)](#) of the Local Government Code which reads:

“Before the 10th day before the date of the meeting, the commissioners court **must publish in a newspaper** of general circulation in the county a notice of: (1) **any salaries, expenses, or allowances** that are proposed to be increased;” The **public notice** posted in the Johnson City Record Courier on August 16, 2023 failed to include all of the “salaries, expenses, or allowances” that were proposed to be increased during this fiscal year. More importantly, the salaries that were posted understated the actual salaries of several elected officials by as much as 26%.

[Section 111.003 \(a\)](#) of the Local Government Code requires that Brett Bray, as County Judge, “shall prepare a budget to cover all proposed expenditures of the county government for the succeeding fiscal year.” Included in his budget are proposals for salary increases for all elected officials. He also sends a written notice to each elected official prior to filing the annual budget as required by [Section 152.013 \(c\)](#). In July, 2023 he mailed each elected official their proposed salary to be included in the FY 2023-24 budget. In the notices of salary to each official he specified [“Additional supplemental salary...”](#)

Every elected official was notified of a base salary increase for FY 2023-24 to be shown in the **public notice**. However, four officials will receive significantly more salary than shown in the public notice. Each of these “supplemental” salaries were increased for FY 2023-24 and have been increased each of the past three years without the required public notification. Officials receiving the undisclosed salary are paid as much as 26% more than their peers holding similar positions with the same base salary (see [salary chart](#)). Those receiving significantly more pay than published by Judge Bray are:

- “Emergency Management Coordinator” - additional \$18,071 for Commissioner Pct. #3
- “Indigent Healthcare” - additional \$13,846 for Blanco County Treasurer
- “Recycle Center Coordinator” - additional \$13,174 for Commissioner Pct. #4
- “Maintenance Supervisor” - additional \$13,846 for Commissioner Pct. #2

When Judge Bray was confronted regarding his failure to accurately publish a public notice in the newspaper which complies with Section 152.013 (c), he has consistently rejected the requirement. On August 23, 2022 he verbally responded that “extra funds are in the budget and names are ID’ed; then it is transparent.” The current budget is 96 pages long. Is the public required to search through 96 pages to find Judge Bray’s hidden salary allocations for “other services?”

Another Statute Violation:

The Local Government Code further states in [Section 154.004 \(b\)](#) “If a county officer is paid an annual salary, the state or any county **may not pay a fee or commission to the officer for the performance of a service** by the officer.”

Judge Bray has been advised of this provision in the statutes several times during the past three years. During the October 27, 2020 Commissioners Court meeting he tried to justify his actions when he said the “functions that we are talking about either we wouldn't get done or would cost the county significantly more if we didn't have folks to step up and take on these roles”. Judge Bray has referred to these services as “side duties”, “roles”, or “functions.” State statutes do not define all of the duties or salaries for the elected officials. Counties are given great freedom in defining the specific duties of elected officials, and when members of the public run for county office they are indicating they will “step up” to provide the services that are necessary.

A review of neighboring county budgets did not identify any county that pays a separate salary to elected officials for any side duty or other “service”. Over the past four years the County has always maintained a practice of paying most full time elected officials the same base salary, regardless of the fact that the officials are responsible for dissimilar functions. Judge Bray has been utilizing the “supplemental salary” to increase pay for certain individuals.

Most counties do not have a one size fits all salary structure. Many have varied pay for officials holding the same or similar positions. Some of the variation is based on longevity pay which rewards knowledge and experience gained on the job. In other cases the variation appears to be based on the differences in the physical and operational requirements of the jobs. Whatever the reason for the variation, only one salary is paid for all services rendered and the entire salary is published in the public notice as required.

Why Does Judge Bray Oppose Transparency?

Over the past four years Commissioner Liesmann has consistently requested that the county obtain a salary study for all county employees, including elected officials. He prevailed last year and a study was performed comparing like positions in Blanco County to nine other counties and five cities. The outcome of the study, which was adopted by Blanco County on June 13, 2023, provides a pay range for all Blanco County positions. Salary ranges for every position, including elected officials, have a minimum, midpoint, and maximum. The ranges allow for a difference in salary based on qualifications, experience, operational considerations, and performance evaluations. An analysis of the salary study will be discussed in a future article. Some of the counties and cities chosen for the comparison are very different than Blanco County. In particular, comparing Blanco County to Travis, Bexar, and Williamson counties as well as the cities of Austin and San Antonio seem inappropriate and likely skew the study results.

Judge Bray embraced the salary ranges and used them to justify raises for all elected officials for FY 2023-24. The raises averaged 7.29%, bringing the average [cumulative salary increase](#) to 39.1% over the past five years. Due to the ranges adopted, some official's raises were more than others to ensure they fell within the range adopted. However, Judge Bray continued to understate the salary of those officials receiving the large “supplementary salary” for other services. He chose to justify the salary increases based on the study, but still did not publish the real salaries in the public notice.

The statutes referenced are in place to prevent hidden earnings by elected officials. Judge Bray could have revealed the actual salary for every elected official in the public notice while varying the salaries based on responsibilities and experience. If he had done so he would be in compliance with the statutes. Judge Bray chooses to continue his practice of violating the statutes by maintaining secrecy.

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