



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS NEWTON

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Dear President Laredo and City Councilors,

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On June 19, 2019, two members of the League of Women Voters of Newton (LWVN) observed a meeting held by the City Council's Programs and Services Committee regarding the recommendation of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Salaries. Our comments below are based on the work of the committee so far to review the [recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission](#).

The League of Women Voters of Newton (LWVN) holds good governance as a core value. Our observations frequently separate out decisions on policy from the process by which the decisions are made. To date, the LWVN has not taken a position on whether to support or oppose an increase in compensation for our elected officials but does have comments on the process so far.

When we talk about process, we mean how our city government goes about making decisions. We appreciate that the City Council created the Blue Ribbon Commission on Salaries comprised of a variety of residents, none of whom currently serve as an elected official. This diverse group gave its recommendations to the City Council at the end of May, and since then the Programs and Services Committee has discussed it for at most 90 minutes, without arriving at or voting on a solid recommendation.

What seemed most important to the committee during its discussion was the time frame—how to accomplish a vote of the full City Council by the end of September in time to enact a pay raise for the incoming City Council in January. This was extremely disappointing, in part because it seemed as if there was already a general agreement about a raise, and the focus had turned to how much and how to hold a vote in time for the raise to start in January.

The Commission discussed at length their concern about equity among City Council and School Committee members as well as the impact of cost increases on the city, and neither concern has been further explored. The recommendation to restructure total compensation for elected officials was not enthusiastically received, and committee members noted that there would need to be a discussion with the Mayor about this proposal. Salary increase specifics were not discussed at great length either, though numbers went as high as \$19,000 as a base salary for City Council members, not including health benefits. Note that if the councilors' current base salary is nearly doubled, some would receive total annual compensation of almost \$40,000.

The Programs and Services Committee then agreed to start a public comment period in July and to leave it open until early September. We appreciate having so much time for the public to comment, but are unclear of the hearing's purpose and how this opportunity is being conveyed to the public. We are being asked to comment on the Blue Ribbon Commission recommendation, not on a proposal coming from this committee. There did not seem to be an overwhelming agreement with the proposal of the Blue Ribbon Commission, so we are unclear how much of a raise will be presented to the full City Council, the structure of the compensation, and the source of the funding. In short, what is the committee recommendation to be put forward to the full City Council? Will there be another public hearing and some public outreach about this issue once you have decided?

We hope that the committee focuses on more than a raise in base salary. The concern shown by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Salaries about equitable total compensation for all City Councilors and for all School Committee members deserves careful thought and their recommendations should be seriously considered and explored. Additionally the increased cost to the City and taxpayers also deserves time and thought. However, it appears that the rush to vote in time for the City Council to see a pay raise in January outweighs the need for transparency and deliberation.

We note several facts that might not be well-known by Newton residents that are also worthy of inclusion in any discussion on this topic:

- Elected officials are treated as full-time employees of Newton, and so are eligible for the same benefits as full-time teachers, policemen, firemen and other city employees, regardless of how many hours the elected officials work. We note that the positions of elected City Councilor and School Committee member are intended to be part-time. Only the Mayor position is officially full-time.
- The base salary for City Council and School Committee members hasn't changed in two decades. Those who do not take health benefits are compensated approximately \$10,000 and \$5,000 respectively.
- Health benefits can be worth over \$20,000 if an official participates in a family health plan. Currently, about half of all City Councilors and School Committee members join the health plan, meaning that they are compensated up to \$30,000 and \$25,000 respectively.
- The Blue Ribbon Commission on Salaries recommended a new structure of compensation for City Councilors and School Committee members as a way to begin to address this inequity among elected officials who do and do not take health insurance. We note that the Commission had a number of human resource professionals and attorneys as members who pushed back on the City Law Office's concern that this new structure would need to apply to all city employees.
- The Blue Ribbon Commission on Salaries was not charged with evaluating the funding source for any such increase, and so any additional cost to taxpayers for an increase in salaries still needs to be discussed and funds found.

In light of this rather non-transparent, rushed process, we are sending our letter to Village14.com, the Newton TAB, the Newton Patch, Newton News at NewTV and to all LWVN members in the hopes of sparking more discussion in the community.

Sincerely,

Marcia Johnson
President, League of Women Voters of Newton