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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

After several years with no pay raises, Seward County employees could be looking at a wage increase for a second consecutive year.

County commissioners are scheduled to discuss a potential raise of as much as 50 cents an hour for county employees at tonight's regular meeting, a move that comes after workers were given a 5 percent raise in 2013.



The commission hosted a work session on March 17, and county administrator April Warden said at the board's April 7 meeting that commissioners had asked to see what impact raises of 25 and 50 cents would have on the county's budget.

"We did get those totals for you tonight," she said at the April 7 meeting. "I gave you a sheet that breaks that down by department. That increase for yearly total is \$100,352.20 for a 25-cent increase and \$200,192.20 for a 50-cent increase."

Warden said the county normally puts money in its reserve for claims fund for salaries consideration.

“You have time to determine, based on 13th month and other factors involved in the budget, if you intend to do anything with county raises,” she said. “That money was put aside in reserve for claims in salary proposal.”

At its 2013 budget workshop, the commission anticipated a carryover of about \$1.9 million, but Warden said the county got much more than that.

“You had a \$3.4 million carryover,” she said. “That’s quite a substantial difference from what we anticipated. Part of that was for CIP purchases that we didn’t purchase. Part of that was the CIP software in that reserves, which was around \$222,000. Part of that was part of your reserves to make that \$3.4 million.”

Other reasons for a bigger than carryover was savings when it came to equipment for some departments, according to Warden.

“We were able to transfer vehicles from the sheriff’s office to the appraiser’s and appraiser’s to planning and zoning and save some money,” she said. “At budget time, we’ll be able to take those off the budget better.”

Warden said the county needs to be careful, however, about how much money it has left over from year to year.

“We don’t want that much carryover, but we don’t want to look like we’re carrying over irresponsibly either,” she said. “Sales tax was up. We didn’t anticipate it to be up as high as it was this year. Budget work session time is always an anticipation of what you think things are going to be. We had more this year than what we thought.”

On the Tuesday following the April 7 meeting, Warden said she posted eight job openings in the county, and she talked about what many of the exiting employees had said upon leaving the county.

“The thing that most of them will tell you is, ‘I have too much responsibility for the amount of money that you’re paying,’” she said.

County commission chairman Ada Linenbroker said not doing something could mean more employees leaving the Seward County entity.

“We have to really be competitive salary-wise because other businesses are offering another \$1, \$2 more,” she said. “That’s where the people are going.”

Warden said she had visited with many youth in college about what they are looking for, and she said there is a difference from some of the generations of yesterday to today’s when it comes to what matters.

“We’re told you have to go to college,” she said of what she was told by the young people. “It’s not an option. Go get your college education. We step out, and we pay the amount of money that it takes to go to college. They said we’re promised that when we get out of college that we’re going to get a \$45,000-a-year job, and that does not happen. They leave thinking we stepped out and went to college because you said we had to, and now, we have all these student loans and all this stuff that we have to pay back. They think they should be able to just step in at the top. They don’t have to work their way up.”

Warden said she believes Seward County is competitive in terms of salary, but she said more steps could be taken, particularly when it comes to paying similar salaries for similar jobs.

“When we didn’t upgrade our step-and-grade for four years to keep up with the cost of living, I think we got behind the market in some, but not all,” she said.

Linenbroker said she would like to see something done before seeing more employees walk out of the county's doors.

"I would like to give our employees at least something to show that we do appreciate what they're doing," she said.

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