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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Daily Leader

In January 2005, Seward County began using a step and grade system approved by its county commission that implements pay for performance through an evaluation system that provides for a step increase of 2.4 percent for current employees.

Under the system, employees were to be evaluated at least three times a year with overall net result of a 3.0 rating or better to be eligible for a merit increase to be awarded at the beginning of the next year.

“The system was developed to take the favoritism out of the process,” county administrator Mary Bloomer said in a memo to commissioners in the agenda packet for Monday’s meeting.

On Monday, the board split its vote, with commissioners Steve Eisenhauer and Jim Rice voting against and commissioners Joyce Hibler and Toby Hale for, to approve merit increases for 160 county employees eligible for such raises.

Commissioner C.J. Wettstein was absent from the meeting, but he did send an e-mail to county counsel Dan Diepenbrock regarding the matter. Wettstein said he agrees with other county officials that employees of the county are its greatest asset, and workers must be maintained by the county.

“But when we are looking at businesses in Seward County that are having to cut employees’ hours from a 40-hour work week to a 30-hour work week and maybe even to a 20-hour work week to get by, or they are actually laying people off their jobs completely to make things work, I

feel we should not be increasing the salaries of Seward County employees when things are this tight in the county," he said.

Wettstein said many people in Seward County have seen incomes reduced by as much as a third to a half of what they received in previous years.

"We budgeted for the 2.4 percent increase for merit raises in our 2010 budget process, but we also told the department heads to put it in, but we might not be able to give merit pay raises even though we budgeted for it," he said.

Wettstein said if the raises were approved, the county would spend \$109,972 to reach the level.

"We are looking at some substantial items in the county we need to fix, and our money has tightened up," he said.

Wettstein said for these reasons, he felt the commission should not approve the merit pay increases.

"Seward County, so far, has been able to keep all employees on the payroll at full time and has not had to lay off any employees," he said.

Wettstein said another factor to look at is the substantial increase in the county's health insurance premium.

"We talked last meeting we were looking at a 9.3 percent increase, which would be a substantial increase," he said. "Even with the fact we are looking at increasing our self insurance from \$50,000 to \$75,000 to try to hold our premium at the same price as last year, if we should have four bigger claims, that would cost the taxpayers of Seward County \$100,000, so we are looking at the possibility of substantial increases any way we look at it."

Wettstein asked while its employees are its greatest asset, with the current state of the economy, does the county want to put the burden of increased wages by a merit pay increase on the shoulders of the taxpayers of Seward County who are hard pressed to keep up with their own families?

“I would like this to be a matter of record that I will have to regrettably vote no for a 2.4 percent merit pay raise for the Seward County employees for the year 2010,” he said.

Bloomer said the commission budgeted for a 2.4 increase across the board for merit increases.

“Not all employees are eligible for merit increases,” she said. “This is not the same as a (cost of living adjustment).”

Seward County currently has 206 employees, 160 of whom are eligible for merit increases. The remaining 46 are not eligible for the following reasons:

- o They are already maxed out on the step and grade grid;

- o They did not receive a high enough score for their reviews; or

- o They are elected officials and are not reviewed, and their positions are not on the step and grade grid.

Bloomer said the dollars requested for the merit increase have already been budgeted for and are not an additional amount being requested.

Tie vote kills motion for county salary increases

Tuesday, 16 March 2010 13:05

“The 13th month reports reflect that we came in under budget for 2009, and our cash carry-over for the general fund was even better than expected,” she said. “I believe these two items are due to the diligent efforts of our county employees, and I would ask that you please give favorable consideration to granting the merit increase to those employees that earned the appropriate scores.”

The commission voted 2-2, with Eisenhower and Rice voting against the motion, to approve merit increases for eligible employees for the 21 remaining payrolls for 2010. That vote essentially ends the debate this year, as it kills the motion.

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