

Letter: Investigate Sutter County

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In regard to the Jan. 8 article, "Grand jury clears auditor of wrongdoing in release of salaries": I question the reason for the grand jury investigation in the first place. Where we do need to have a grand jury investigation is with the Sutter County administrator, and the district attorney. Of course this could never happen, because this certainly would be an abuse of authority. It would be like asking the fox, "Who's eating the chickens?"

As long as the "auditor," not the auditor-controller like it should be, is stripped of his authority to control reckless spending and waste, we the citizens will be paying taxes to support the corruption that pervades Sutter County.

Ron Reavis - Sutter

December 11, 2010 - By Ben van der Meer and Ashley Gebb - Appeal-Democrat

At a time when Yuba-Sutter's regional unemployment rate is among the highest in the nation, a database of public employee salaries shows at least two dozen local officials made more than \$150,000 in 2009. The list includes some contracted positions paid for by both Yuba and Sutter counties, but is led in non-contract positions by a since-retired fire chief in Yuba City, Yuba City City Manager Steve Jepsen and Yuba County Administrator Robert Bendorf. According to Sutter County, three contracted psychiatrists, each of whom made more than \$200,000 in 2009, are paid by the state and federal government, and their salaries are negotiable, with the lack of qualified psychiatrists in the area a factor in those negotiations.

Personnel officials from the four government agencies in the database — Yuba and Sutter counties and the cities of Marysville and Yuba City — defended the numbers and said, in some cases, the database lacks context. Yuba County Personnel/Risk Management Director Martha Wilson said salaries for some top Yuba County officials are high because of a longevity system the county adopted a decade ago. Under the system, employees receive raises based partially on how many years they have spent with the county, with a 1.5 percent increase for every year beyond the fifth, up to 30 years.

"We couldn't afford the enhanced retirement being offered in other places," Wilson said. "The idea was to pay people to work, not to retire." Because Bendorf, for example, first worked for the county when he was 18 years old, raises for longevity, cost-of-living and merit have pushed his earnings beyond his position's base annual salary of \$133,668 to \$193,872 in 2009. In base salary, Wilson said, many Yuba County po-

sitions earn less than comparable ones in Sutter County. But Sutter County Chief Administrative Officer Stephanie Larsen said her county's last comparison survey, from 2004, showed Sutter is comparable to nearby counties and other state counties of similar size. A smaller study in 2008 showed the county's salaries below the median for some positions, she added.

"Our pension benefits make us more competitive," Larsen said. Cities have similar gap Marysville's most recent salary survey, about five years ago, showed the city clerk, who is among the top 10 earners, made 50 percent less than the mean of comparable cities, said Administrative Services Director Dixon Coulter, whose salary was about 28 percent below the mean. Most of the city's contract professional employees were also underpaid. It's no surprise that Yuba City's shadow over Marysville extends to salaries, Coulter said. Bigger cities typically pay better than smaller ones.

"The city of Marysville struggled for a long time while right across the river from us was a very strong economy, a growing, vibrant city that could just afford to pay better," Coulter said. "But it's always going to be a challenge for Marysville to hire and retain employees long term." After the salary survey, all rank-and-file employees were adjusted to 90 percent of the mean. Instead of aiming for the mean, Yuba City's salaries are based on total compensation, internal structure and the surrounding geographic area, with Woodland, Chico and Rocklin among comparable cities, said Human Resources Director Susan Pearson. What the city can afford is an additional factor.

Certain salaries are high because employees have been with the city for more than 30 years and received cost-of-living adjustments and step increases. Of Yuba City's existing 281 employees, all but 36 are at the top step of their salary range, she said. The majority of Marysville's employees also have reached the top step, but continue to be paid less than counterparts in comparable cities, Coulter said. At the time of the salary survey, its police officers were 20 percent to 25 percent below the mean, but their benefit package was worth about 12 percent more than the mean.

The low law enforcement pay is a fiscal reality, said Marysville Police Chief Wallace Fullerton. As a result, the city has a large attrition problem, as officers leave for higher-paying jurisdictions, leaving the department in a constant training stage and needing more overtime from remaining staff. "I think they are worth every dime of what they get paid," he said. "Frankly, I wish we could compensate them more." Fullerton himself makes less than other law enforcement leaders in the area. He took a 20 percent pay cut when he left Los Angeles in 2007 to come to Marysville. "It was more important to spend time with my kids than to make money," he said.

Marysville does what it can to be competitive, Coulter said. But its greatest appeal is probably a personal one, he added, for those who are drawn to the small-town atmosphere. "The decision to stay and work in Marysville is not driven by the fact it pays so much better than everybody else — because it doesn't," he said. Drawing comparisons "Looking at salaries among different positions in different cities is very difficult to compare in an apples-to-apples kind of way," said Eva Spiegel, communications director for the League of California Cities.

Experience level, cost of living, population base and geographic location are all factors, Spiegel said. Even among city managers, the pay varies statewide. Jepsen's salary puts him within a few thousand dollars of city managers in Malibu, Chico and Fullerton. Marysville City Manager Steve Casey's salary is on par with those who hold his position in Yreka, Oroville and Novato. Compared to salaries outside the Yuba-Sutter region, local government salaries are fair for county employees, according to Erin Treadwell, a spokeswoman for the California State Association of Counties.

Treadwell said Yuba and Sutter are comparable to Mendocino County in terms of population, but both lag in salaries. "Part of being a county is having local control," Treadwell said. "It's up to the locals to set what's being paid." Yuba City pays a good salary in relation to its proximity to Sacramento, but employees are not earning what their positions would in the capital, Jepsen said. "You can pick a number. What's too much?" Jepsen said. "There are probably people out there that are willing to do the job of the top-paid officials for a lot less money. I'm not sure how well they would compete in a pool of qualified applicants."

Coulter said it's difficult to say what the public sector jobs would be worth in private industry or how the pay relates to other professions, whether teachers or professional athletes. But a city has to be competitive within its industry. "I want my policemen and my firemen and the people taking care of my roads and parks to be competent enough to do their jobs," he said. It is possible the marketplace has raised salaries to a point where everyone ends up paying more — a trend that's hard to buck, Jepsen said. "It's something that needs to be watched, so that salaries don't grow disproportionately," he said. Governments scale back As the economy sank in recent years, all jurisdictions have felt what officials call a fair share of pain. Earlier this year, Yuba County laid off employees and didn't give contracted raises to bargaining units, Wilson said.

"The money just wasn't there," she said. Employees under the management and confidential category had their pay cut by 5 percent, Wilson said. The county is also working on a revamped longevity plan, which Wilson said would also curb the high amounts of pay some top administrators now receive. In Sutter County, Larsen said,

bargaining units gave up a planned 3 percent increase, and some began picking up their share of retirement costs, rather than the county. It laid off one person because funding from another source, Yuba City, was cut. Both cities underwent cuts of their own.

Yuba City employees have not received a cost-of-living adjustment since 2008-09, accepted furloughs and had layoffs and department reorganization. Marysville has laid off 20 percent of its employees, and remaining employees had 15 percent pay cuts. Further salary cuts, Coulter said, would eventually drive employees elsewhere. "If everybody is cutting away and there is no real other place to go, in the short term you could probably get away with it," he said. "But we want to actually keep them employed." Jepsen is comfortable with Yuba City's salaries, but said they will be reassessed as positions turn over.

"It's hard to go back on people who have been here a number of years and change their expectations on what compensation they were provided before I ever showed up," he said. Workers, watchdogs differ Gary Stucky, executive director for the Yuba-Sutter County Employees Association, said he didn't begrudge the salaries earned by top county officials. Nor did he think rank-and-file employees, such as the 1,100 his association represents, were overpaid. "These two agencies are not in the habit of giving out money willy-nilly, in my experience," said Stucky, who's worked with YSCEA for 30 years. "There is plenty of room for reasonable people to differ on what's a fair salary."

The database would be more useful, he said, to include duties for the positions listed and the overall allocations the counties make to different departments for compensation, as well as salary schedules. Given economic forecasts for the region, he said, both Yuba and Sutter employees should be ready for more cuts and adjustments. Yuba City employees have already made two years of concessions and are likely looking at a third. Even so, Dave Calonder, president of the Yuba City Employees Association, said there are few issues with compensation. "Most people are just happy to be employed," he said. "Is there some question about rates at the higher levels? Naturally. That's something that's always there."

Calonder thinks management could give more than the rank-and-file employees, 88 of which are represented by his association. Cuts to deferred compensation contributions and vehicle allowances may come up during the next round of bargaining, and employees are also concerned about the number of administrators for the city's size. "I call it the chief-to-Indian ratio," he said. The president of a watchdog group said there are legitimate questions about what Sutter County and Yuba City managers earn when compared to private-sector employees and even state officials.

Pat Miller, president of the Sutter County Taxpayers Association, said Jepsen, for example, makes \$199,280 a year to manage a city of 300 employees and about 65,000 residents. The Caltrans District 3 director, who is based in Marysville, makes \$114,101 annually but oversees 1,850 employees and operations in 22 counties. "I believe that the cities and counties have played a leap frog game with salaries in other cities and counties for many years and have used the comparisons to continually raise salaries and benefits — a 'they did it, so we have to raise our salaries to stay competitive' attitude," Miller wrote in an e-mail after reviewing the database.

Miller said top public administrators should freeze salaries and then base future salaries on what local employees make in the private sector for comparable work, to bring the numbers more in line. Representatives in all four agencies cited recent reports showing public employees who have comparable experience and education make less than counterparts in the private sector. "The high-level government jobs often require advanced college degrees and years of experience," Larsen said. Defending their pay Most employees at the top end of the local government pay scale said they acknowledge they are well compensated. They're also given big responsibilities, they pointed out.

"We're all very lucky to have the employment we do," said Yuba County District Attorney Patrick McGrath, who made \$183,188 in 2009. He has been with the county 26 years, which partially explains his salary, he added, along with having a professional position as an attorney. But prosecutors on the whole make less than they could if they left public employment and worked full-time in criminal defense, McGrath said. Partially because of that, he said, he didn't believe salary helps retain employees in his office.

Bendorf, who noted his salary is partially set by the county Board of Supervisors, said he doesn't think of his job in terms of how much he makes. He pointed out he had taken a pay cut in the last year and also had seen staff in his office reduced, giving him more duties. "I don't have a deputy county administrator or assistant county administrator," Bendorf said. "The hours I've put in speak for themselves." Neither Jepsen nor Casey was surprised to be at the top of his city's lists, even though Casey earns less than all top 10 earners in the other three agencies. "The council gives me a fair pay for the community and its needs," Casey said. "The city is not a rich city and that's understandable."

Yuba City's salary was one of the reasons Jepsen applied for the job, even though he was city manager in Oceanside.

"I'm very well-paid for what I do here and I appreciate that," he said. He understands he can withstand a pay cut better than the average employee, which is why he took a

voluntary 5 percent pay cut and will deduct another 5 percent starting Jan. 1. The first cut is not represented in the 2009 database. Marysville's Fullerton also found no surprise that he was the third-highest earner within the city. Police chiefs are typically one of the highest-paid employees, based on the training, experience and expertise. The same concept goes for the city police captain, who is sixth on the list, and four police sergeants on the list. It's important to note, Fullerton said, unlike his salaried position, the other figures are total income, including overtime.

"These people are working way up and beyond 40 hours a week," he said. One of his sergeants, Christian Sachs, actually made more than Fullerton in 2009 (\$125,926 vs. \$123,550) as the result of overtime pay. Along an economy of scale, it's cheaper to pay overtime than hire another person with salary and benefits to do certain duties, such as working to secure grants, Fullerton said. To those who make assumptions about public employees and what they make based on the database, officials said a broader perspective is needed. "The demand on government is higher in tough times," Wilson said. "Yuba County, in my entire experience, has been careful about public purse strings and public trust."

Y-S SALARIES: Lists by cities, counties - HIGHEST PAID IN YUBA-SUTTER - 2009

- \$320,284.14* Marc Boomgaarden, fire chief, Yuba City
- \$219,324.00 Douglas R. Crisp, psychiatrist, Sutter County
- \$218,400.00 Oscar L. Jaurigue, psychiatrist, Sutter County
- \$209,040.00 Prudencio G. Samson, psychiatrist, Sutter County
- \$199,280.40 Steven Jepsen, city manager, Yuba City
- \$193,872.00 Robert Bendorf, county administrator, Yuba County
- \$192,886.09 Joseph Cassady, health officer, Yuba County
- \$192,538.41 Samuel R. Sanders, physician, Sutter County
- \$184,069.76 William Lewis, utilities director, Yuba City
- \$183,825.60 Larry T. Combs, administrative officer, Sutter County

* Includes retirement payouts totaling \$140,975.54

SUTTER COUNTY

- \$219,324 Douglas R. Crisp, psychiatrist
- \$218,400 Oscar L. Jaurigue psychiatrist
- \$209,040 Prudencio G. Samson, psychiatrist

\$192,538 Samuel R. Sanders, physician
\$183,825* Larry T. Combs, administrative officer
\$176,324 Ronald S. Erickson, county counsel
\$168,000 Sadoutounnissa Meer, psychiatrist
\$166,526 Olga L. Gonzalez-Cruz, physician
\$163,171 Ronald Hayman, psychiatrist
\$155,027 Carl V. Adams, district attorney

* Combs left Sutter County in November 2009 for a job in Merced County.

YUBA CITY

\$320,284** Marc Boomgaarden, fire chief
\$199,280 Steven Jepsen, city manager
\$184,069 William Lewis, utilities director
\$169,832 Steven Kroeger, asst. city manager
\$159,822 Robert Landon, police chief
\$159,545 Robert Bills, fire battalion chief
\$156,589 John Limas, fire battalion chief
\$156,239 George Musallam, Public Works director/city engineer
\$153,591 Garland Garrisi, fire battalion chief
\$151,080*** Richard Doscher, police chief

** Boomgaarden's total pay includes \$140,975.54 in sick leave, vacation and admin leave payouts upon his retirement.

*** Doscher's total pay includes \$146,293.78 in sick leave, vacation and administrative leave payouts upon his retirement.

MARYSVILLE

\$130,755 Stephen Casey, city administrator
\$125,926 Chris Sachs, police sergeant
\$123,550 Wallace Fullerton, police chief
\$122,016 David Lamon, city services director
\$99,868 John Osbourn, police sergeant

\$97,965 Mike Wilson, police captain

\$97,149 Dixon Coulter, administrative services manager

\$96,367 Dustin Brown, police sergeant

\$92,168 Marc Carroll, police sergeant

\$90,867 Billie Fangman, city clerk

December 11, 2010 - By Ben van der Meer and Ashley Gebb - Appeal Democrat

Fallout from a scandal over employees in the city of Bell taking home exorbitant salaries has trickled down to local jurisdictions, including Yuba and Sutter counties and the cities of Marysville and Yuba City. The state controller's website and the League of California Cities mandated the agencies provide salary details, which are now posted online. "Cities across California are very committed to transparency," said Eva Spiegel, communications director for the League of California Cities. "Even before the controller released his regulations requiring that cities do this, an increasing number of cities are putting that information online."

Yuba and Sutter counties and Yuba City have posted salary figures and schedules on their websites for at least a few years. Marysville would if it had the resources to do so, said Dixon Coulter, the city's administrative services director. "We think that transparent disclosure should happen at every level of government," Spiegel said. "The state should be equally transparent." In Yuba County, visitors to the personnel office's website can find both base salaries and ranges for every county position, as well as how pay for those positions would grow over time. But Personnel/Risk Management Director Martha Wilson said a visitor would have to know how long a particular employee had worked for the county, or other specific information, to know exactly what someone is making.

Likewise with Sutter County's website, which lists a range of pay rates for positions at different steps of the pay ladder, but not a specific amount for a specific employee. "We've had all our salaries online for a decade," County Administrative Officer Stephanie Larsen said. "I'm not sure every secretary and deputy sheriff has to be listed by name." Benefits are not included on the websites of any of the three local jurisdictions that publish their salary information. In requesting salary information, the state Controller's Office is not looking for issues like the Bell case, but merely providing the information so citizens can see how their tax dollars are being spent, said spokesman Jacob Roper.

"One reason this database is so large is it includes everyone," he said. "It's everyone from the dog catcher to the city manager." The website has gotten quite a bit of traffic since it was launched, and the controller will soon be adding more data. Some special districts have until Monday to send the state salary information, so it can be loaded onto the site next month. The Yuba-Sutter Transit Authority, the Linda Fire Protection and Meridian Fire Protection districts are among those special districts. State officials will eventually ask the Olivehurst Public Utility District, Linda County Water District and Loma Rica-Browns Valley Community Service District for their salary information.

All of the state's special districts and state employee payrolls are expected to be on the website by June. Tim Shaw, general manager of OPUD, said his agency has already provided the information. "It's part and parcel of being a public agency to make salary information more convenient for the public," he said. But at the local level, few citizens apparently seem to care. Before Bell and the associated scandals there, no one other than the Appeal-Democrat and the occasional gadfly resident seemed interested in Yuba City's salaries, said Human Resources Director Susan Pearson. Since Jan. 1, the city has had 148 hits on its salary information webpage and 1,930 hits on its salary schedule.

Marysville doesn't have enough staff to build a database on its own website, but it has provided its information to at least three agencies and the newspaper. Even so, Coulter doubts many people are looking at the databases. In the last three years, only one person has asked the city for a copy of the city budget. No one has asked to see salaries. "There is just this level of disengagement to running a city on the part of the public that is amazing," he said. After Bell, the state and League of California Cities' dissemination of salary information may be warranted or necessary, but Coulter said he doesn't see the value in a lot of reports.

"The city of Bell was found out about (without it)," he said. "They got caught. Isn't that how the system is supposed to work?" Yet there is agreement the increased push for transparency is not a bad thing. "An informed citizenry makes the most healthy democracy," Spiegel said. "By having residents informed and engaged in the community, they can hold people that service them accountable." The good thing about Bell is it will probably prevent other cities from going down the same path, Pearson said. And many cities have checks and balances in place to prevent such abuse. "It's like one bad apple, that's what Bell is," Pearson said. "There are so many agencies doing the right thing." Wilson, with Yuba County, agreed.

"I think Bell was such an aberration, and everyone knew it was such an aberration," she said. Even so, Yuba City City Manager Steve Jepsen said he has always felt a need for government transparency, especially in regard to salaries.

"The only exception I would make for that is if publishing the information became a problem, especially for our public safety officers," he said. The requests from different agencies with varying specifications on the information can be a burden on a short-staffed city, but maybe it will spur the public to pay more attention, Coulter said. "The more people become involved in their government, the more knowledge they have about how it operates. It can only be a good thing," he said.

Two of Yuba City's highest-paid officials took home nearly half a million dollars in 2009 — and it was not even for a full year's pay. When Fire Chief Marc Boomgaarden retired in November 2009, Yuba City wrote him a check for \$140,975.54 in sick leave, vacation and administrative leave payouts. It boosted his total pay for the year to \$320,284.14 — making him the highest paid official in Yuba City and all of Yuba-Sutter that year.

Even though Police Chief Richard Doscher retired in December 2008, he received a payout the following month of \$146,293.78 in sick leave, vacation and administrative leave. The check boosted his annual salary in 2009 to \$151,080.15 and pushed him to 10th on the list of Yuba City's top earners.

Such large salaries stemming from retirement payouts are rare, said Finance Director Robin Bertagna, but they do make a dent in the city's budget. Payouts are not directly budgeted for at the beginning of the year, but contingency funds are set aside for that purpose. The payouts are received in the employee's final check. In addition, the city will try to leave a position vacant long enough to pay for the payout, Bertagna said. In Boomgaarden's case, Assistant Fire Chief Pete Daly was promoted to interim fire chief; his previous position remains vacant. Regardless of the dollar figure, the payouts are something the employees have earned, said Human Resources Director Susan Pearson. "It's their benefit," she said.

The city has no cap on sick leave, but employees only receive 15 percent to 30 percent or 25 percent to 50 percent of what they've accrued depending on when they are hired. There are maximum vacation accrual limits based on service.

"We are either going to pay it when they leave or in paid time when they are here," Pearson said. Employees used to have more of an incentive not to use their sick leave because there was a larger percentage of payout upon retirement, she said. Today, the percentage is low enough that people tend to use it earlier. The size of a payout depends on the individual, Pearson said. Department heads, especially those in public safety, are typically the highest earners within the city. "If you are getting an experienced chief, you are going to pay for that," Pearson said.

Their replacements will be brought in at a lower step, but still at a comparable rate for

their position. "If we lower salaries, we are no longer going to be competitive," Pearson said. "We will not be able to retain and recruit quality employees."

Another of the city's highest earners in 2009 was Utilities Director Bill Lewis, who retired in April of that year. He was the third highest paid Yuba City official, with a \$184,069.76 salary, and his department merged with the Public Works Department after his retirement during consolidation to reduce city expenses. George Musallam, who took on Lewis' responsibilities, did not receive a raise for assuming the additional duties.