

Getting Down to the Heart of the Matter

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – June 2, 2013

Local press and the general public are worked up over raises the Covington City Council quietly voted themselves and the Mayor last year. It was the right thing to do, but the wrong way to do it. More important, though, the fussing is missing the bigger point.

Increasing the Mayor salary from \$12,000 to \$18,000 and councilmembers from \$6,000 to \$9,000 was long overdue. “But, a 50% raise is outrageous!” you shout. Perhaps, but with no raise since 1977, that’s an annual increase of less than 1.4%. Considering inflation, \$12,000 and \$6,000 in 1977 would equate to \$46,046 and \$23,023 in 2013. You’d burn down City Hall over figures like that.

Some argue these are voluntary roles deserving only token compensation. Funny, when you ask those same people why THEY don’t “volunteer” to serve, they want no part of the headaches accompanying public service. Someone should do the job for less; they just don’t want it to be them. From 2007 to 2011, nine council seats were up for election. Only five candidates qualified who had not previously served.

“But, they voted themselves the raise,” you object. Salaries for the Mayor and Council are set in the City Charter, and only the City Council can amend the charter. It’s awkward, but what else were they to do?

For starters, they could have noted the increases explicitly during discussion of the amendments last April and May. I also think the council could have achieved transparency and reduced mistrust by establishing a special citizens’ panel to review compensation in similar-sized city governments to make recommendations to the council.

I wish it had been handled differently, but I support the result. Except...

Money is not the issue. We continue to miss the boat. Whether it’s the press leading the electorate or the electorate leading the press, I’m not sure. But both salivate like Pavlov’s dogs at the mention of “tax increase” or “salary increase.”

With an estimated 13,226 residents, \$24,000 in raises will cost \$1.81 per person per year. That’s miniscule compared to the much larger impact actions of the Mayor and Council have on our lives and livelihood. Yet, the average citizen (and even the press) snores through the business of government. Just the simple fact the City Charter was majorly revised and no one asked “what’s in there?” proves that.

My complaint isn’t what I pay; it’s what I get. Businesses offer competitive salaries to attract and retain talent to achieve objectives. “Salary commensurate with experience,”

they say. Earning potential depends on what you know (skills and experience) and who you know (your network of professional colleagues and contacts).

I don't mind paying a serious salary, but I expect professionalism in return. As a Covington resident living in the East Ward, my representatives are underperforming.

Within 12 months of taking office, Georgia law requires municipal officials attend six hours of Newly Elected Officials training from the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) and the University of Georgia's Carl Vincent Institute of Government. Beyond that, GMA and CVIG offer dozens of continuing education courses and various levels of certification.

GMA records through April show my three council representatives – Mike Whatley, Keith Dalton, and Chris Smith – have no certifications. Beyond the mandatory course, Whatley has taken 18 hours of training since 2000, Dalton has taken one six-hour course, and Smith has taken none. In office just over 16 months, Mayor Johnson has completed only the mandatory course. None of these men regularly attends GMA conferences. The three ladies representing the west ward have multiple certifications.

In business, professional development is expected of every individual; it should be the same in government. It's not just training. Classes and conferences provide networking with fellow elected officials who can be mentors and sounding boards with valuable experience in the nuances of civic leadership.

In four years as Mayor, my wife Kim achieved two certifications and completed 72 hours of training. She took time away from her business because issues like economic development, municipal law, development authorities, ethics, and planning and zoning were vital to the interests of the people of Covington. She'll tell you those learning experiences paved the way to results like a \$9M private investment in affordable senior living, the turnaround of Walkers Bend, the Covington Redevelopment Authority, and lower utility rates.

When I vote this November and again in two years, I'm not interested in who raised their salary. I'm interested in who treats the job like a professional responsibility worthy of that salary. Help wanted.