

Open Work Sessions
Discussion on Premium Pay from American Rescue Plan
August 17, 2021

Mrs. Pam Oland, Director of Finance, and Ms. Jaci Curry, Director of Human Resources, came before Council. Mrs. Oland said they have had requests from a couple Departments – Corrections, Emergency Services, and the dispatch section of the Sheriff’s Department, to look at ways they can help retain the employees they have. She explained, those positions are very training intensive and it is expensive to train them. She said they are in the process of doing a salary survey for the County as a whole, and they are currently below market for what they give to those positions in their current pay scale, but they do not know the magnitude of their problem across all Departments and all areas. She said the way they are looking to address this until the salary survey comes in is to look at these three Departments because of the salary issues and the competitive nature of getting these positions filled and retained. She said the American Rescue Plan allows them to provide premium pay to people who have worked through the pandemic on-site, and all three of those positions are ones that cannot be done elsewhere and cannot be remote because they cannot have a Correctional Officer work from home. She said, for the fiscal year 2022, they are looking to provide an incentive for the employees who were here as of June 30, 2021 and also the employees who will be here as of December 31, 2021 to try to retain the employees they currently have who are currently trained. She said they are at a competitive disadvantage to some of the other local correctional facilities, and this is one way to bridge the gap until they know the magnitude of the problem for the County as a whole. She said they do not feel it is appropriate at this time to pick and choose Departments to give raises to, but they feel they can provide this and reward the people who had to be here throughout the pandemic and use funding that does not come out of fund balance. She clarified, it is American Rescue Funding that they have received from the federal government.

Mr. Holloway asked, what about Roads and Planning and Zoning because they all worked through it. He said he knows Roads is down significantly with the number of employees they have, so have they considered them too, to which Mrs. Oland responded, they have looked at other Departments. She said she also has looked at her own Department because her Department worked through the pandemic and were here, but they only had five employees who had to physically be in the building five days a week throughout the whole thing. She said all of her other employees worked part-time in and out of the office, and, looking at the American Rescue language, it is geared towards those who had to actually come in physically. She said she has heard the Council state that they have heard from some Departments about concerns about their pay, and this is one way they can bridge a gap until they have the full picture. She said she is not saying there are not other areas within the County, but this meets the definition to the best of her ability to read the Legislation. She said, even though everyone talks about spending the American Rescue money, they are still in a state of interim guidance. She clarified, they do not have a final ruling from the federal government as to how this money can be spent, so the Executive and Finance Department, as well as Human Resources, have made the decision that, in this instance, this is the most appropriate way to spend a portion of this funding without concerns that it will violate any restrictions when the final rule is issued.

Mr. Holloway said the Roads Department and landfill had to come to work also, to which Mrs. Oland responded, she understands. Mr. Holloway asked if they were considered in this at all, to which Mrs.

Oland responded, no, not at this time. Mr. Holloway asked if this is coming from the County Executive, and he did not consider them in this, to which Mrs. Oland responded, not at this time.

Mr. McCain commended Mrs. Oland and Ms. Curry. He said he knows, particularly with the correctional officers, this has been just an ongoing issue and struggle and he knows they are struggling retaining people. He said they are hiring people, but it seems to be that seven leave and only five come, and it is just an ongoing struggle. He said he knows they will certainly appreciate this and it is something they can do, and that is what these funds are made available for. He again commended them for their efforts and said he knows it is a struggle, and he commends them for doing the Countywide study because that needs to be done, but he recognizes the fact that it will take time.

Ms. Curry said she thinks they have all heard the commercials from the State advertising for correctional officers and how everyone is down and in need of positions, and they are in that position as well. She said, for Corrections, for example, there are 18 positions open in that Department, so they have to do something to try to recruit and retain these folks to come to their County.

Mr. Davis said he agrees with what they are doing, but they are picking and choosing certain Departments. He said, if they look at the County as a whole, the whole County is suffering as far as employees with retaining them. He said he thinks if they are just going to pick and choose a certain Department, they are going to make the other Departments mad, and that will make them leave even faster. He clarified, he understands what this money is for, but he thinks they need to go ahead and do this assessment of the salaries of their County employees, which should have been done a long time ago. He said this stuff did not just happen, it has been going on for years, and it should have been addressed awhile back. He said this will help some, but it will still not retain them because they are going to look at their base salary. He said the survey they are doing needs to hurry up because that is what they need. He said this is going to help some, but will not help all.

Mrs. Oland responded, it is in process right now, and they are in conversations, if not daily, weekly with the entity that was hired to do the survey. She said it is, again, intended to give them the information they need so when they come back to Council again they have the County as a whole and know the financial impact as a whole to the County. She said she understands that it is picking and choosing, she gets that, but they felt that this tough decision needed to be made at this time. She said, again, her own Department is being impacted and not getting anything from this, and they had to be here too, so she gets that. She said it is not an easy decision that they came to, and it is not an easy thing they are putting before the Council, and they understand that it is going to frustrate and annoy other Departments, but they felt this met the most pressing needs that they have at this moment for those two types of employees in three Departments.

Mr. Holloway asked what the staffing level at Roads is right now and how many people they are down because he knows they are down, to which Ms. Curry responded, she believes they are approximately eight positions down if she is not mistaken. Mr. Holloway said, since the highway user revenue got cut a few years ago, Roads has been ripped apart anyway, and they do not have enough people there as it is, but they are currently down eight. He then asked how many they are down at the landfill, to which Ms. Curry responded, she believes three or four. Mr. Holloway asked if Planning and Zoning is fully staffed, to which Ms. Curry responded, she believes they had a recent resignation, so they are down one or two positions, but she is not exactly sure.

Mr. Holloway said ultimately it is the County Executive who sent this to the Council, so it is him picking and choosing. He said it is put in front of the Council and he guesses they can make recommendations if they want to add to it.

Mr. Hastings thanked Mrs. Oland and Ms. Curry for taking this up. He said the Council gets emails sent to them all the time from County employees who maybe want to be anonymous, or they find him at the supermarket and pull him aside and he does not know who they are, but they know who he is, and they tell him this is an issue. He said the Council has gotten multiple folks who have reached out and said how dire the situation is, especially with Corrections, so he really applauds them for taking this first step. He said this is going to be important going forward because they want to make sure that their County employees feel respected and that they are getting enough money and all the rest of the benefits, so he thanks them for doing that.

Ms. Curry said this is the public safety component of it, and then the salary survey will address all fulltime positions in the County in all Departments.

Mr. Cannon said that might be an important distinction. He clarified, he recognizes the fact and appreciates the fact that all of their Departments worked during the COVID crisis, but, in particular, Corrections and Emergency Services were on the frontline. He said they were right there face to face with the threat of exposure, and he thinks that is part of why Mrs. Oland said there were particular guidelines they had to follow, and it was probably relative to that exact issue, so he would not say it is picking and choosing, it is following what the directive is based on the funding available from the government. He said, that being said, he thinks this is good and he appreciates them doing this, and they certainly will have to take a review of every Department as the survey comes out, but for now he thinks this is a very creative initiative in order to compensate these individuals who were on the frontlines. He then thanked Mrs. Oland and Ms. Curry.

Mr. Dodd asked how many dispatchers the 911 Center is down, to which Ms. Curry responded, four. Mr. Dodd said he knows they are struggling there and they are working hard, especially now with all of the additional calls they are getting because of possible COVID and other emergencies. He said also the volunteers are really struggling and they are doing that on their own with a little bit of assistance from the County, so that is really difficult.

Mr. Dodd said he has been listening to many of the employees from Corrections for about 20 years and it has always been a problem, so he gets that. He said it was mentioned about the State hiring, and on Route 50 there are several billboards for correctional officers, and that is a good position to get with the State because it is a good job.

Mr. Dodd said the Council talked with the Sheriff and they are down 12 deputies. Ms. Curry said they have four positions open for communications operators. She said, for the 911 specialists, while they have four positions open, they also have additional people in training who are not fully equipped to be on their own yet, so that is an even bigger obstacle as well.

Mr. Dodd said the County is down a lot of employees, and it seems like they are picking and choosing, but they have to start somewhere and he applauds their Departments for looking into this. He said he encourages the Executive and staff to look at ways to increase the opportunities for their County employees because this County cannot function without good employees.

Mr. Dodd asked for a consensus to move forward with this, to which there was.

Mrs. Oland asked if this will be on the agenda on September 7, to which Mrs. Hurley responded, yes.

There was no further discussion.



Larry W. Dodd, President, District 3



Joe Holloway, Vice President, District 5



John T. Cannon, At-Large



William R. McCain, At-Large



Ernest F. Davis, District 1



Nicole Ache, District 2



Josh Hastings, District 4



Laura Hurley, Council Administrator