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County workers start to feel pain

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Analysis: Stearns staff paid most

Stearns County employees earned more than their counterparts in Benton and Sherburne for similar jobs last year, but workers in all three counties are starting to feel the impact of budget cuts on their paychecks.

The St. Cloud Times requested the compensation paid to employees of Stearns, Benton and Sherburne counties in 2010, including base salary, overtime and any additional pay.

Some findings:

- » The median base salary for Stearns County workers last year was \$50,215, compared with \$45,433 in Sherburne County and \$45,884 in Benton.
- » About one-fifth of Stearns County employees earned more than \$75,000 last year, while fewer than 10 percent of Sherburne and Benton County workers earned that much.
- » A handful of county employees – 32 in Stearns, eight in Sherburne, four in Benton – earned six-figure salaries. Not all were in the traditionally high-paying positions of county attorney or administrator. Among those earning more than \$100,000 last year in Stearns County were assistant engineers, division directors in the human services department, the building facilities director and the jail captain.
- » The 10 highest-paid employees in the three area counties in 2010 included six attorneys, two county administrators, a county engineer and a human services administrator.

Comparing counties

It's not surprising that Stearns County pays better than its neighboring counties, administrators say. Stearns' workforce of about 850 employees is about 30 percent larger than Sherburne County's and more than three times that of Benton County's. And with 150,642 residents counted in the 2010 census, Stearns dwarfs the other two counties in population to serve and tax base.

When calculating whether its wages are comparable and competitive with other counties, Stearns officials use neighboring counties – Benton, Sherburne, Wright – and some in the Twin Cities metro area, including Scott, Washington and Carver.

"We could get by on lower salaries if we were competing for employees with the small counties that surround us," Stearns County Commissioner Leigh Lenzmeier said. " ... If we need a mid-level person on up, we're competing with the metro counties."

In Benton County, which struggles with a much smaller tax base and higher tax rate, officials compare

salaries not only to Stearns and Sherburne, but to Isanti, Meeker, McLeod and other similarly sized counties, County Administrator Monty Headley said. Benton's salaries can't compete with property-rich counties like Stearns, he said.

"We do our best to be competitive and to be an attractive employer," Headley said. However, "affordability always plays into the calculation," he said.

Cost cutting

Jeff Mergen, one of two new commissioners on the Stearns County board, made employee wages an issue in his campaign last fall. Mergen, a former teacher, said Stearns County's workforce has grown faster than the county's population, and the average county worker earns significantly more than the average private sector worker.

Mergen said when he was campaigning last fall, many people complained about county salaries and their own high property tax bills.

"'Totally out of line' – that's the phrase the people use most often," he said. Mergen said he isn't sure what should be done to rein in payroll, but thinks the issue warrants discussion.

In the wake of the budget showdown in Wisconsin, there has been much debate about the impact of public sector unions on wages and the ability of governments to make budget cuts.

Collective bargaining is a two-way street, said Steve Hammes, assistant to the county administrator, noting "someone on the other side of the table had to agree."

Stearns County's unions have been cooperative in helping find ways to cut costs, including employee furloughs, Hammes said. The county saved more than \$1 million a year through those actions, he said.

"They realized that we are all in this together and they need to feel the pain," Hammes said.

Stearns County employees already have been feeling the pinch through furloughs, rising health care costs and a freeze on some benefits such as cashing out accrued time off, said Shannon Schroeder, staff representative for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Employees also are feeling the strain of rising caseloads because of the economic downturn, but fewer people to handle the work, Schroeder said.

"You have a higher need for the services they provide, but a longer period of time to fill the positions or positions not getting filled," she said.

All three counties have hiring freezes that prevent filling vacant positions unless they are deemed absolutely necessary. Stearns County has eliminated 21 full-time positions since 2009 and has another 36 positions open.

Public sector salaries typically lag about two years behind those of the private sector – both in terms of bonuses and pay increases during the good economic times, and pay freezes during the difficult times, Hammes said. He said it takes a while for a city or county to start to feel the effects of an economic downturn through shrinking tax rolls and tighter budgets.

"We're feeling it," Hammes said.

Stearns County has negotiated two-year contracts with all but two of its employee unions for 2010–2011. The contracts do not include a cost-of-living increase. Employees who are eligible will still get step increases.

Stearns County took some heat for giving employees cost-of-living increases for the last couple of years. That was because the county had negotiated three-year contracts before the recession hit hard, Hammes said.

"You can't really say, 'Oops, we're not going to do it,' " he said.

Similarly, all of Benton County's unions have agreed to contracts with no cost-of-living increases in 2010. The county's budget for 2011 does not include any money for cost-of-living increases, largely due to the uncertainty over what the Legislature will do to balance the budget, Headley said.

"That has translated into caution on our part about committing to the growth in the cost of compensation and benefits," Headley said. "Undoubtedly, that has carried over into the negotiation process."

Retirement

As baby boomers begin reaching retirement age, county government is seeing some of its most experienced – and highest paid – employees in leadership positions heading for the door.

Stearns County expects to lose half of its department heads by 2013, County Administrator George Rindelaub said. Roma Steil, longtime human services administrator, left April 22. Don Adams, environmental services director, retired last week.

Retirements of longtime employees don't always mean substantial cost savings. For some positions such as a snowplow driver, a newcomer won't earn nearly as much as their predecessor who spent decades on the job. But for positions that require specialized skills – a nurse or a computer programmer – it's not always possible to find someone at a much lower wage, Hammes said.

The majority of Stearns County employees received pay increases in 2008 and 2009 when the county completed a comparable worth and pay equity study.

Some positions received a bump not because they require a degree, but because of the decision-making and problem-solving required and the risk involved, Hammes said.

The jail captain is an example, he said. Jail inmates are more violent now than 20 years ago, and the responsibility of keeping inmates and staff safe and operating the jail within budget is a much greater responsibility, Hammes said.

"Thirty years ago, Stearns was kind of a sleepy county where not much happened," he said. "Nowadays ... we're much bigger, and we have bigger problems."

Times Assistant Managing Editor Mike Knaak helped compile and analyze data used in this report.

Why do we list salaries?

In recent years, newspapers, governments and other websites have made public worker salaries – which have long been public and available if requested – searchable online to foster transparency and allow taxpayers to see how their money is spent.

The St. Cloud Times requested the compensation paid to employees of Stearns, Benton and Sherburne counties in 2010, including base salary, overtime and any additional pay.

The data can be searched on the Times' Watchdog Center at www.sctimes.com/watchdog along with the salaries of state employees, posted each year since 2008.

Top 10 earners

These were the 10 highest-paid employees in Stearns, Benton and Sherburne counties in 2010:

1. Roma Steil, Stearns County human services administrator, \$145,986.
2. Mitch Anderson, Stearns County engineer, \$145,361.
3. George Rindelaub, Stearns County administrator, \$141,742.
4. Janelle Kendall, Stearns County attorney, \$133,539.
5. Brian Bensen, Sherburne County administrator, \$132,253.
6. Dennis Plahn, senior Stearns County attorney, \$130,668.
7. Matthew Quinn, chief deputy Stearns County attorney, \$130,568.
8. Will Brost, senior Stearns County attorney, \$130,038.
9. Richard May, senior Stearns County attorney, \$128,711.
10. Kathleen Heaney, Sherburne County attorney, \$127,126.

Source: County administration. Amount listed is total compensation, including base salary plus any additional pay.

What they earned

Position: Public health nurse

County: Stearns

Years working for the county: 2

Earned in 2010: \$54,294

Position: Senior attorney

County: Stearns

Years working for the county: 20

Earned in 2010: \$112,325

Position: 911 dispatcher

County: Stearns

Years working for the county: 6

Earned in 2010: \$46,669

Position: Detective

County: Stearns

Years working for the county: 14

Earned in 2010: \$84,782

Position: Social worker

County: Sherburne

Years working for the county: 18

Earned in 2010: \$63,097

Position: Correction officer
County: Stearns
Years working for the county: 5
Earned in 2010: \$49,748

Position: Highway maintenance/equipment operator
County: Sherburne
Years working for the county: 6
Earned in 2010: \$40,285

Position: Land use technician
County: Benton
Years working for the county: 4
Earned in 2010: \$41,376

Position: Office support specialist
County: Benton
Years working for the county: 2
Earned in 2010: \$26,855

Position: Appraiser
County: Stearns
Years working for the county: 10
Earned in 2010: \$65,919
Source: County administration