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California Official's \$800,000 Salary in City of 38,000 Triggers Protests

By Christopher Palmeri - Jul 20, 2010 11:20 AM MT

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Hundreds of residents of one of the poorest municipalities in Los Angeles County shouted in protest last night as tensions rose over a report that the city's manager earns an annual salary of almost \$800,000.

An overflow crowd packed a City Council meeting in Bell, a mostly Hispanic city of 38,000 about 10 miles (16 kilometers) southeast of Los Angeles, to call for the resignation of Mayor [Oscar Hernandez](#) and other city officials. Residents left standing outside the chamber banged on the doors and shouted "fuera," or "get out" in Spanish.

It was the first council meeting since the [Los Angeles Times](#) reported July 15 that Chief Administrative Officer Robert Rizzo earns \$787,637 -- with annual 12 percent raises -- and that Bell pays its police chief \$457,000, more than Los Angeles Police Chief [Charlie Beck](#) makes in a city of [3.8 million people](#). Bell council members earn almost \$100,000 for part-time work.

City Attorney Edward Lee said the council members couldn't discuss salaries in public without advance notice. The council then adjourned for a private session. About an hour later, the council members returned, and Hernandez read a statement saying the city would prepare a report on the salaries and seek public comment at the next council meeting, scheduled for Aug. 16.

Residents shouted in protest. Lee said he would have the room cleared if people continued to speak out of line. Police Chief Randy Adams said the fire department wanted to end the meeting because the crowd outside was blocking the door.

Easing Tensions

Then, in what appeared to be an effort to ease tensions, Hernandez announced that the meeting to discuss salaries would be held instead on July 26.

After the meeting, [Bell](#) resident Ali Saleh read a statement from a newly formed group called the Bell Association to Stop the Abuse. He called for an independent audit of city salaries and contracts.

On July 1 Bell took control of many of the city functions of neighboring Maywood, a city whose council members voted to contract out almost all services. Saleh also asked that Bell stop that process until the city's salary investigations were resolved.

Bell has sold two general obligation bond issues totaling \$50 million in the past six years, according to prospectuses for the bonds and information in the city's annual financial statement for 2009. In that time, its debt has risen to \$1,972 per capita in 2009 from \$599 in 2004, according to its annual financial statement.

Inquiry Under Way

The city's personal income was \$24,800 per capita in 2008, according to its financial statement. That compares with an average of \$32,819 nationwide, according to 2010 figures from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Bell's general fund [revenue](#) declined 4.6 percent to \$14.1 million for the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2009, according to the city's financial statement. The city's expenses rose 2.3 percent to \$15.9 million in same period.

The Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office has begun an inquiry into Bell council member pay, according to Dave Demerjian, head of the office's Public Integrity Division. He said Bell council members were receiving \$8,083 a month, mostly by serving on city-related commissions.

"We're reviewing the council member salaries to see if they conform to state law," Demerjian said in a telephone interview.

California law limits the salaries of council members to several hundred dollars a month, depending on the size of the city, according to [Hector De La Torre](#), a state assemblyman from nearby South Gate, who sponsored legislation in 2005 that limits how much council members can get paid from other city-related assignments to \$150 a month.

'Obscene Pay'

De La Torre said that after his bill was passed, Bell's City Council voted to operate under its own charter, rather than adhere to state laws on how cities should be run.

"It seems obscene to me," De La Torre said in a telephone interview. "People making \$30,000 a year are paying taxes so that their council members can make \$80,000."

Adams, Bell's police chief, said in an interview after the council meeting that he had retired as chief of police in the much larger city of Glendale, California, when Bell officials approached him.

"I told them they would have to pay me what I was making in retirement and the \$165,000 I would make as chief of police," Adams said.

Adams said he had been brought in to end corruption in Bell's police department.

"Some of the former members of this force are in the federal penitentiary," he said.

'Streets Are Cleaner'

Hernandez, the mayor, defended the salaries in an interview with the Los Angeles Times.

"Our streets are cleaner, we have lovely parks, better lighting throughout the area, our community is better," Hernandez said, according to the newspaper. "These things just don't happen, they happen because he had a vision and made it happen."

[Carmen Avalos](#), the city clerk in South Gate, said she attended the Bell council meeting to help educate people about the political process.

"This is what we are trying to avoid," she said in an interview at the meeting. "The lack of fiduciary responsibility, the lack of transparency."

To contact the reporter on this story: [Christopher Palmeri](#) in Los Angeles at cpalmeri1@bloomberg.net.

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