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## Levy County Commission revises offer to employees



**Jeremiah Tattersall speaks from the podium and tells the County Commission that the lawful and democratic method to decide employee pay and benefits is through negotiations with the two unions that represent the different workers for Levy County. To his left in the blue shirt is County Clerk Danny Shipp and farther in the background of this picture is Levy County Finance Director Jared Blanton, architect of revised health insurance offers for county workers.**

### Story and Photos

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 17, 2017 at 8:17 p.m.**

**Updated Aug, 18, 2017 at 1:17 p.m.**

**LEVY COUNTY** – The Levy County Board of County Commissioners in a special meeting on Thursday morning (Aug. 17) rescinded a previous plan to give raises to employees and it revised, again without negotiating with either of the public unions for workers, the health insurance benefit offer for employees.

The two hours of discussion before the 5-0 vote on the motion by County Commissioner Mike Joyner, which was seconded by County Commissioner Matt Brooks, included input from County Commission Chairman John Meeks and county commissioners Rock Meeks and Lilly Rooks as well.

Tax Collector Linda Fugate gave her input during the discussion, and after the vote, County Property Appraiser Osborn “Oz” Barker shared some of his thoughts as well.

In all, while the focus was on specifics of offers for the workers, there was some more universal thought – such as the expression of a belief that municipalities with blight and slum, who use Community Redevelopment Areas (such as Cedar Key and Williston), are taking tax dollars from the whole of the county.

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**Levy County Coordinator Wilbur Dean reads the three different options the members of the Levy County Commission could choose as they revised their plan for employee health insurance coverage in the coming fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1.**



**County Commissioner Mike Joyner made the motion to adopt the option that matched what the county is contracted to do with its employees.**

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**County Commissioner Matt Brooks seconded Joyner's motion. All five County Commission members worked to help reduce the drawdown from the reserve account the county has in its budget.**

Jeremiah Tattersall of the North Central Florida Central Labor Council and Katy Yanok, president of IAFF Local 4069, both tried to help the members of the County Commission understand that the commission did not follow the proper method for revising pay and benefits for the county government workforce.

“I want to encourage you (County Commission) to go to the bargaining table not just because it is the lawful thing to do,” Tattersall said, “but because it increases democracy.”

Tattersall said firefighter union members and other public service union members let their representatives know what they want in regard to a fair contract.

The action on Aug. 17 was a reaction to an outcry from the workers after a July 18 meeting, where the County Commission adopted a plan to give some raises but to change health insurance coverage for workers, and for those who had them, for workers’ spouses and children who were on health insurance plans.

That plan to only cover up to \$9,512 per employee for health insurance in the year was undone on Aug. 17.

Likewise, raises that had been proposed to offset this reduction in coverage were also undone.

The deal created on Thursday shows the county covering health insurance for county employees. All costs for health insurance coverage for spouses and children of the employee, however, are to be completely borne by the employee.

As for the mention of “tiered” raises, those are gone. No wage increases (raises) are being offered now, however those possible raises are to be subject to union negotiations.

Commissioner Rooks asked County Coordinator Wilbur Dean if the raises were no longer being promised. He confirmed that. No raises are listed at this time, he said. Dean added that those raises listed before ranged from 2.5 percent to 10 percent for employees.

Commissioner Rock Meeks said he preferred to go with the option closest to the contractual

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agreement, and as it was reviewed during the meeting on Thursday morning, that was “Option 2,” which is what scored the 5-0 vote.



**Tax Collector Linda Fugate said she felt like people with families have enjoyed a benefit from health insurance over the years because the County Commission previously funded some level of that coverage. The latest version of this benefit shows zero help from the County Commission for spouses and children who are on employees' health insurance plans. However, the newest offer shows the county covering health insurance completely for its employees.**

Tax Collector Fugate said she has four of her employees that are using the family coverage. By the way, all of the county constitutional offices except the Levy County Sheriff's Office and the Levy County School Board are part of this plan.

“Over the years,” Fugate said, “the board (of county commissioners) has absorbed a certain amount toward the family coverage. It is my opinion; it is almost unfair to those that don't have family coverage.”

Tax Collector Fugate said she feels the employees with families that are covered are getting a benefit that people without families who are covered would receive. She labeled this as “a bonus every year that the other employees are not” receiving.

She suggested instead of the county absorbing some amount of coverage for family, that the county give \$942.46 times 12, which is \$11,309.52, as the annual per-employee insurance allowance in this fiscal year. This way, each employee enjoys the same monthly benefit, she said.

Instead, as noted, the county chose to cover employees completely and spouses and children with zero dollars toward health insurance.

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**Jimmy Jones, a Levy County EMT with going on 18 years of service to the residents and visitors of Levy County.**

Jimmy Jones, an EMT for Levy County Fire Rescue, was the next to speak.

In March of 2018, Jones said, that will mark 18 years that he will have been employed in Levy County.

Jones grew up in Levy County, he said, and he enjoys helping the people who helped him in his formative years.

In the Emergency Medical Services department of Levy County, he has felt it always was like a tightknit family.

Right now, Jones told the County Commission – as he mentioned that he knows all of them – he is not feeling that level of camaraderie that one feels from family.

“We’re talking about our families here,” Jones said, “our loved ones, our children, our wives, our husbands...”

He pled with the County Commission to take care of “not only our families... but Our Family.”

Jones said he understands the need to be fiscally responsible. The county employees, he added, are not the cause of the fiscal problems.

“So I don’t feel they are the ones to (carry the) burden to fix that,” Jones added.

In 2007, Jones said, both labor unions volunteered to not seek pay increases because the workers all understood the economy was weak.

Since then for the past decade, he continued, the pay increases ceased with the county government agreeing to absorb health insurance cost increases in lieu of pay raises.

By the action the county was going to take, it would have removed the benefit accepted in lieu of wage increases, he said. If there was a 3 percent increase in pay per year, then he sees this as a potential 30 percent pay loss.

IAFF 4069 President Katy Yanok added to this by answering a question Commissioner Joyner put forward about raises. She said some firefighters were awarded for investing their own money and time to take classes, which resulted in merit increases by them becoming better at their profession through ongoing educational programs.

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Linda Cooper, a Levy County taxpayer has been critical of the County Commission, said she would like to know how the county leaders plan to look forward to avoid a repeat performance like this.

She noted that the failure of the county to negotiate with the unions before creating these plans is upsetting to her.



## County Commission Chairman John Meeks

Chairman Meeks reacted to Cooper's comments.

He said he was elected in 2012 and began serving in 2013. He is unable to speak about what previous County Commission members did or did not do, but he trusts they did the best they could for the county's taxpayers and for the employees.

In his first year, with a budget that already had been adopted, he found almost \$200,000 where he could remove "wasteful spending." The commission then cut the proposed budget by \$1 million in 2013, he said.

In 2014, the commission, Chairman Meeks said, "took a couple of steps back" and it made some purchases of equipment and added staff.

In 2015, the County Commission held firm, the chairman said. Costs were going up for insurance, retirement contributions and in other areas, he said. Property values were not increasing as had been hoped.

In 2016, Chairman Meeks, former County Coordinator Freddie Moody, County Clerk Danny Shipp and former Finance Director Sheila Rees cut everything possible from the budget – going line by line, Meeks said.

Chairman Meeks said the team cut, and cut, and cut.

Also in 2016, he said, he passed the gavel of chairmanship so that he could make the motion to increase property taxes to 9 mills.

Chairman Meeks said the practice of cutting from expenses is good, but there is a need to increase revenue to get out of a deficit spending pattern, where the county had been pulling from its reserves.

Meeks went on to remind people that just in the past few months, the County Commission approved a 5-cent-per gallon local option tax on gasoline purchases. This brings the local option tax amount to 11-cents per gallon on gasoline.

The added 5-cent tax starts on Jan. 1, 2018. That money, he said, will help the Levy County Road Department fund what is needed for its work on roads. This will keep Road Department employees

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employed, and it will allow the county to continue to provide road maintenance services in the county.

Local option gasoline sales tax, he said, is paid for by residents and visitors who buy gasoline in Levy County.

Chairman Meeks said he and the other County Commission members faced choices -- fire employees; stop providing services; or cut overhead costs that increased in health insurance.

Meeks said the budget for this year shows the county must spend almost \$2.5 million on health insurance. The ad valorem property tax revenue for the county is about \$14.5 million this year, he said after conferring with staff at the meeting.

Meeks said this was too high of a percentage (about 20 percent) of the total budget to not take action this year. The County Commission saw this as an area where the budget could be revised.

County Coordinator Dean mentioned that Levy County Finance Director Jared Blanton previously showed that Levy County was fifth highest in the state for the amount of money it contributed toward employee health insurance. Even with the change where spouses and children no longer get any coverage from the county, Levy County will still be eighth highest in the state, Dean said.

IAFF Local 4069 President Yanok, in response to a statement Chairman Meeks had made about different levels of pay for different commissioners said this is not a valid point.

By not negotiating with the unions before imposing revisions to pay and benefits, it causes a flaw, she said.

“You may see it looks like we (employees) are being ungrateful (for proposed tiered pay increases and health insurance benefit revisions),” Yanok said. “Unfortunately, myself, the union officers, the union officers from the 630, we are all bound by law.”

Even if any particular offer looks good to her, she said, it would be in violation of the law regarding public union negotiations, and it is an unfair labor practice for her to accept this without negotiating.

This is not about employees being greedy, Yanok continued. This is about the process being performed properly between management and labor to reach an agreement on conditions of employment.

Since the July 21 offer from the union to schedule additional negotiation meetings, the county has not responded, Yanok said.



**County Commissioner Rock Meeks**

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County Commissioner Rock Meeks, near the end of the very long discussion, said Levy County has the best employees in the State of Florida. Every department has excellent employees, he said.

This choice, Commissioner Meeks said, has been tough for him.

“These decisions,” he said, “are by far the toughest decisions I have made as a sitting county commissioner. Without a doubt, I have lost sleep. I worry about each employee that we have.”

Rock Meeks was an employee of Levy County before he was elected as a county commissioner.

He reminded people that over the years, the County Commission has been spending down its reserve of revenue.

If it continued as it had, Commissioner Meeks said, then within two years it would have hit the point where it would have to start laying off employees and adding them to the numbers of unemployed people.

“I don’t want to sit in this seat and make that decision (about who to remove as employees),” Rock Meeks said.



**County Commissioner Lilly Rooks**

County Commissioner Lilly Rooks said that no matter what the County Commission does, the employees will think the decision is wrong.

Chairman Meeks added to that sentiment.

He said people should not be bitter about what they see as a benefit that is being taken away from them.

“The argument could be made ‘I work here for benefits,’” Chairman Meeks said. “You know, I understand that. And I hate it.

“You still have good insurance on yourself as an employee,” Chairman Meeks said. “You have the opportunity to purchase damn good insurance for your family. It may be expensive. You may be able to go out to the private sector, like, Jacob said.”

Meeks went on to say some other employees told him they found private sector health insurance options.

“Some people don’t have that option,” he continued. “They are in too bad of health. They’re in the



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wrong age group. Their kids are teenagers and they cost too much to insure. Whatever the issues are; if you went out and found better insurance then we haven't done you a wrong. We have actually done you a service."

After the vote had been cast, Property Appraiser Barker spoke to the County Commission and to the people in the standing-room only meeting room.

Barker said he has six of his nine employees who use health insurance from the county for their families.

The amount that it will cost them is \$587 a month, or \$7,044 extra a year, Barker said.

Barker was elected in 2008 and he took office in 2009. At the time of his starting, there were 15 employees in the office. Through attrition and not replacing employees, the staff was cut to nine people, Barker said.

His budget dropped 35 percent after the first four years, Barker added.

Barker said he agrees with the County Commission's choice in revising the insurance plan for workers to reduce the deficit spending, which takes from the reserves in the budget. He said this is something that has been needed for years.