

Jackson County commissioner pay rivals that of other Oregon counties

Salaries a contentious issue; newly approved increases to take effect in July

Salaries for Jackson County commissioners have been a political hot potato for almost two decades, and a recently approved salary boost in July would top commissioner pay in the most populous counties in Oregon.

Salaries comparable to Jackson County's are mainly found in the Willamette Valley, and the county's salaries played a role in last year's commissioner raises in both Deschutes and Lane counties.

Commissioners Colleen Roberts and Rick Dyer will earn \$150,009.60 annually on July 1, while outgoing Commissioner Dave Dotterer will go up to \$136,073. As members of the six-member budget committee, the commissioners approved the salary recommendation of the county's Elected Officials Salary Review Committee, which met April 16.

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The salary committee is composed of the three members of the Jackson County Budget Committee who are not county commissioners, and they recommended 4.6% cost-of-living increases.

Once voters select a commissioner to replace Dotterer, that person would start out at the lowest pay level of \$117,562, receiving step increases the longer they're in office.

Jackson County has the sixth-largest population of the 36 counties in the state, and Dyer and Roberts' new salaries would exceed that of similar commissioner roles in the five most populous counties in the state, according to county staff reports handed out at the April 16 meeting.

For instance, Multnomah, the county with the largest population in the state, hiked commissioner salaries from \$131,162 to \$144,278, according to information obtained through a public record's request. The commissioner board chair in Multnomah, who also performs duties similar to those of a county administrator, will get a salary hike from \$217,860 to \$239,646. The raises will take effect July 1.

Other counties in the state give the board chair extra compensation for increased responsibilities.

Jackson County Administrator Danny Jordan told the budget committee at the April 18 meeting that commissioner pay comparisons don't always directly translate.

For instance, he noted that Clackamas County pays a deferred compensation contribution on top of salary. Clackamas also pays commissioners longevity pay and additional pay for the person who serves as the chair for the year.

"Actually, when you include all of those pays, and you average that salary — as of the January '25 pay — Clackamas County commissioners on average make more than our county commissioners on average," Jordan said.

May 21 primary ballot measures

The issue of local commissioner salaries has resurfaced with a trio of ballot initiatives that voters will consider in the May 21 primary that propose cutting commissioners' salaries to \$75,000 annually, increasing the number of commissioners from three to five and making the commissioner position nonpartisan.

All three sitting commissioners have opposed the measures, as well as many Republicans in Jackson County. County officials say cutting commissioner salaries could create a conflict between Oregon law and the county charter regarding compensation, a matter that might have to be settled in the courts.

Commissioner Roberts, who became Jackson County commissioner in 2015, originally campaigned on taking a reduced salary during her first term but has taken the full amount for the past few years.

In 2019, the Association of Oregon Counties listed the commissioner pay of the 36 counties in the state, and Jackson County was at the top. The association hasn't compiled an updated salary comparison.

Since 2019, other northern counties have boosted their salaries.

"Unfortunately, we became the model," said Dave Gilmour, a former Jackson County commissioner and chief petitioner for Jackson County for All, which is spearheading the ballot measures to change the structure of the Board of Commissioners. "Instead of us becoming like Portland, Portland has become like us."

Gilmour voted for the original salary process in the 2000s that set the stage for the pay the commissioners receive today. At the time, Gilmour declined to take the increase until his last year in office. He said commissioner salaries quickly went from about \$60,000 to more than \$90,000 in a few years.

"The argument at the time was that it would encourage the best people to run," Gilmour said. In retrospect, Gilmour said he rejects the idea that high commissioner salaries are necessary to attract the best people.

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Denise Krause and Dr. Dave Gilmour, chief petitioners of the Jackson County for All effort to reshape the county Board of Commissioners, on the steps of the county courthouse.

Andy Atkinson / Rogue Valley Times

Deschutes County, the seventh-largest in the state with a population slightly lower than Jackson, last year hiked the salaries of commissioners from \$111,422 to \$125,149, according to the Bend Bulletin.

Deschutes officials based the increase on comparable salaries in Clackamas, Lane, Jackson and Marion counties.

At the same time, Deschutes commissioners raised property taxes for rural county residents by 6 cents to roughly \$1.28 per \$1,000 in assessed property value to help deal with dwindling revenues.

Deschutes County Commissioner Phil Chang, who opposed the salary hike in his county and decided to take only a 4% cost-of-living increase, said there was some discussion about taking Jackson out of the list of comparable counties.

“Jackson is our problem comparable making us bloat our salaries for elected officials,” Chang said. “Because Jackson County is such an outlier because of its low staff pay but high elected official pay, we thought about throwing it out of our comps (comparable counties).”

Deschutes last year changed its commissioner position to nonpartisan, and Chang said an effort is underway that could increase the number of commissioners from three to five.

Lane County, almost twice the size of Jackson County and the fourth-largest county by population in the state, last year boosted commissioner salaries from \$87,869 to \$114,026, effective in January 2025, according to that county’s website.

The counties used for comparison by Lane County included Washington, Clackamas, Deschutes, Marion and Jackson.

Washington County, the second-largest in the state, pays commissioners \$115,000 a year and the board chair \$126,500, according to its website.

Commissioners in Clackamas County, with the second-largest population in the state, earn \$125,085.39, with the board chair receiving \$127,587.10, according to an April 1 salary schedule prepared by that county’s Compensation Board for Elected Officials.

Marion County, with the fifth-largest population in the state, provides \$130,158 to its commissioners, according to a recent salary survey compiled by Jackson County.

Commissioners in Linn County, with the eighth-largest population in the state, receive \$112,385, according to Jackson County’s salary survey.

Jackson County commissioner salaries are higher than most state elected officials’ pay, including that of the governor, who gets \$98,600.

In California, members of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors are paid \$140,148, according to that county’s website. Supervisors in California have a similar role to commissioners in Oregon.

Commissioner Rick Dyer defended the salaries of Jackson County commissioners, while saying, “We are on the high end.”

He said population size isn’t the only factor driving the commissioner salaries.

The county has a \$640-million annual budget, 1,100 employees and 17 departments, including the airport and the Jackson County Expo, Dyer said.

“The proof is in the pudding,” he said. “Our county is run extremely well and in a very professional manner.”

Even though the county is run well, Dyer said the county still has to watch its budget carefully to deal with services that are “above and beyond,” such as providing increased animal control services.

Dyer, an attorney with a degree in accounting, said he doesn’t expect the salary cap proposed by Ballot Measure 15-226 to be upheld by the courts if voters approve it.

“This is nearly a slam dunk to be overturned and challenged,” he said.