

Hard times vs. hard work

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While the Housing and Redevelopment Authority has been a constant, tightly run ship in Austin, the waters might be getting a little rougher lately.

On the HRA board's agenda for its monthly meeting Wednesday afternoon is continued discussion of a staffing proposal and wages, including an employee who could receive a 31.6 percent increase for re-classified job duties and a promotion.

"My first concern was when I saw the increases," said Roger Boughton, HRA board member.

The proposed changes in the works come after the retirement of one of HRA's property managers, Tom Smith.

With the loss of Smith in July, there are now three property managers instead of four managing the HRA buildings. The shifting of job duties brings a wage shift to the table for the HRA to consider.

The newest property manager employee, who's been there about a year, would be reclassified as a public housing property manager for Pickett Place. She was previously a public housing assistant manager for Austin's Twin Towers; she now is a certified public housing manager.

The proposed wage worksheet that came to the board at its July meeting included a 31.6 percent wage increase for the new Pickett Place manager, a position that is a promotion from the work she's been doing for the past year. That's going from a \$14.62 rate, increasing it by \$4.62 to arrive at the \$19.24 rate as of Oct. 1. The \$19.24 wage is the starting step A on the wage schedule for a property manager.

Adjusting wages

In the original worksheet, that increase was higher, in the neighborhood of 45 percent, but the proposal, which is based on a survey of other HRAs (Brainerd, Red Wing and Winona), was revised after dropping Mower County and St. Cloud from the survey to lower the average.

This wage proposal, composed by HRA executive director Jim Hurm and HRA accountant Sherri Detloff, was on the agenda to be approved in July, but it was Boughton who spoke up and asked to have the issue tabled. Discussion continued for about an hour at a work session Aug. 10.

"It seemed to be out of sync with me," Boughton said. "Forty-five percent increase, that gets your attention."

Overall savings

Even with that increase for one staff member, the total HRA payroll would decrease by \$13,000 under this plan. Boughton said during the work session that it's not the \$13,000 savings they're talking about.

"We're concerned about employees significantly getting increases above and beyond what any other employee in the city of Austin is getting or expects to get this year," Boughton said.

Boughton said he thinks a wage increase of 31.6 percent should come over several years.

“It didn’t sit well with me — doing it all at once,” Boughton said. “For all kinds of reasons.”

Board chair Marvin Repinski recommends the board postpone the re-writing adjustments and realigning of job descriptions for one year, except when it’s necessary for the adjustment in job descriptions.

In addition, Repinski recommends that HRA employees take a voluntary salary freeze for one year. If that doesn’t happen, he recommends salary increases be limited to 4 percent.

Both Hurm and Detloff agreed that this job and wage shift need to be done. Detloff called the wage proposal a “no-brainer.”

“We’re doing the right thing here,” Hurm said. “How can this be bad when the cost is going to be less than it was last year?”

“So why is this going to be so damn controversial? I don’t get it.”

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