



The (Hidden) Costs Of Elected Office







Review reveals that, in some cases, taxpayers are paying health benefits for former mayors, trustees

BY KYLE CAMPBELL



West Hampton Dunes Mayor Gary Vegliante.

MAYOR	VILLAGE	YEARS OF SERVICE	2014 SALARY	HEALTH BENEFITS?	LIFETIME BENEFITS?	IF YES, AFTER HOW MANY YEARS?
 Gary Vegliante	West Hampton Dunes	21 years	\$80,000	No	No	N/A
 Maria Moore	Westhampton Beach	Two months	\$25,124	Yes	Yes	10 year

 Peter Sartorius	Quogue	6 years (4.5 as mayor)	\$12,000	Yes	Yes	10 year
 Mark Epley	Southampton Village	15 years (9 as mayor)	\$25,000	Yes	Yes	5 years
 Jeffrey Sander	North Haven	7 years (1 as mayor)	\$7,500	No	No	N/A
 Brian Gilbride	Sag Harbor	21 years (5 as mayor)	\$20,400	Yes	Yes	5 years
 Don Louchheim	Sagaponack	9 years (6 as mayor)	\$0	No	No	N/A
 Paul Rickenbach Jr.	East Hampton Village	22 years (18 as mayor)	\$25,000	Yes	Yes	10 year

The Westhampton Beach Village Board's recent decision to double the salary of new Mayor Maria Moore—a move that will make her the second-highest paid mayor on the South Fork has prompted some to question how much those elected to serve their community should be earning.

A Press investigation revealed that, with the exception of the region's highest and lowest paid mayors, most are compensated within roughly the same range, earning between \$12,000 and \$25,000 annually, with one receiving an annual stipend of \$7,500. But most are also eligible to receive benefits, such as health and dental coverage, through their respective villages—benefits that can be granted for life after fewer than three terms in office, eventually costing the taxpayers in the municipalities that they represent tens of thousands of dollars annually.

The Westhampton Beach Village Board altered a local law and approved the reallocation of funds earlier this month in order to double Ms. Moore's salary just one month after she entered office. Though a petition with signatures from 288 registered village voters could stop her increase, Ms. Moore's salary is scheduled to go up next month from \$12,562 to \$25,124.

That move puts her marginally ahead of two mayors—Mark Epley of Southampton Village and Paul Rickenbach of East Hampton Village—both of whom now earn \$25,000 a year, and behind only West Hampton Dunes Mayor Gary Vegliante, who is the highest-paid village mayor in the state, with a salary of \$80,000. **'Just Something That Came Up'**

The manner in which the board adjusted Ms. Moore's salary is permissible under state law, but the timing of the push for a raise was perceived by some to be questionable.

"I don't think it's the smartest thing that the first thing you do is increase your salary," said Sag Harbor Mayor Brian Gilbride, who is earning \$20,400 this year, during a recent interview. "But I don't know, that's just me."

Quogue Village Mayor Peter Sartorius, meanwhile, is set to earn \$12,000 this year and North Haven Mayor Jeffery Sander will receive a \$7,500 stipend.

In stark contrast to the other incorporated villages within Southampton

and East Hampton towns, the area's newest village, Sagaponack, operates with all appointed and elected officials, including Mayor Don Louchheim, receiving no fiscal reimbursement or benefits.

Ms. Moore, Westhampton Beach's first female mayor, explained that while she was aware that her predecessor, Conrad Teller, had voluntarily taken a pay cut from \$25,000 to roughly \$12,500 during budget deliberations in 2010, keeping roughly that same salary until being voted out in June, she was under the impression that he was merely not accepting all of his budgeted salary. In reality, the mayor's salary is set annually in the village's spending plan, which set aside only \$12,562 this year for her pay.

Upon entering office, Ms. Moore said she was surprised to learn that she would not be receiving Mr. Teller's previous salary and asked then-Village Attorney Richard Haefeli if there were any options for switching it back. Still, she maintains that getting her higher salary was not a priority but, rather, "just something that came up when I got started," she said during a recent interview.

"It wouldn't matter to me what it was, because I'm so honored to be in this position, truthfully," she said. "But if the salary was \$25,000, that's what I thought I should be getting. The mayor's salary was \$25,000, so we're just restoring it to what it was before. Just because Mayor Teller took a

pay cut doesn't mean the salary should change."

Estimating that she now works about 50 hours a week, Ms. Moore said she recently decided to close down her private law practice, and part ways with her clients, because she simply no longer has the time to oversee her duties at Village Hall and also run a business.

Bountiful Benefits

Ms. Moore and her fellow village trustees in Westhampton Beach are also

eligible to receive both health and dental coverage, though the new mayor is utilizing only the dental option while keeping her own health insurance. She also is reimbursed at the Internal Revenue Service-set rate of 56 cents for every mile

driven for village-related business.

Westhampton Beach, which has a nearly \$9.8 million budget for 2014-15, now sets aside roughly \$53,000 annually to provide health and dental benefits to six former elected officials with at least 10 consecutive years of service, namely former mayors Robert Strebel, Arma "Ham" Andon and Stuart Tobin, as well as former trustees Ora Belle "Ridgie" Barnett, Alexander Nagle and Harold Williams.

Similarly, Quogue Village now allocates more than \$20,500 annually to pay for the health benefits provided to former Mayor Thelma Georgeson and former trustee Carl Cardo. Both served on the board for more than a decade.

Southampton Village is paying for health insurance for five retired trustees and four retired mayors who served at least five years each; the village did not immediately respond to a FOIL request seeking the identities of the former employees. Southampton Village, however, set aside \$102,851 in this year's \$26.7 million budget to pay for the health insurance being provided to its retired politicians. Southampton Village Trustees William Hattrick, Nancy Mc-Gann and Richard Yastrzemski receive benefits through their village at a total cost of about \$50,400 a year.

Quogue Mayor Peter Sartorius and Village Trustees Randy Cardo, Kimberley Payne and Jeannette Obser all receive health benefits from the village, costing taxpayers roughly \$82,280 a year. Quogue's total budget for 2014-15 comes in at \$7.9 million.

Sag Harbor Village also provides lifetime benefits for elected officials who have served at least five years, while East Hampton Village does the

same for those serving for a decade or longer. East Hampton Village spends more than \$82,300 a year to provide family health insurance coverage for Mayor Rickenbach and Trustees Elbert Edwards, Richard Lawler and Barbara Borsack.

Sag Harbor Village, meanwhile, will be spending \$51,025 this year to provide health care to three of its elected officials, although Village Clerk Beth Kamper did not respond to a FOIL request seeking their names earlier this week.

“I think it’s a legitimate expenditure on part of the village,” Mr. Rickenbach said of the pay and benefits both he and the East Hampton Village trustees receive. “The workload has increased in terms of the challenges of operating a village, and I think that’s universal on the East End.”

Mr. Rickenbach’s salary has steadily increased from \$7,200 in 1997 to \$25,000 today, with near-annual increases, with the exception of the 2009-10 fiscal year, which saw his salary dip slightly from \$23,000 to \$21,850 because of an economic downturn in the village. In 2011-12, it ticked up to \$24,000 before increasing again in 2013-14 to \$25,000. “There’s been no outcry against it,” he said. “Voters feel that it’s an equitable exchange.”

Varying Responsibilities

Mayors in these villages lead their respective boards of trustees and sign off on village budgets. Other duties vary from municipality to municipality, depending on which services are provided by the village and which are contracted through either Southampton or East Hampton towns.

Westhampton Beach, Sag Harbor, Quogue, Southampton and East Hampton villages all have their own police departments that their respective mayors oversee, while West Hampton Dunes has a constabulary, and North Haven and Sagaponack villages contract with the Southampton Town Police Department. Some villages also have public works

departments, and others have highway departments that need to be overseen by their mayor as well.

Accordingly, these villages also have varying budgets, ranging from several hundred thousand dollars as is the case in Sagaponack to nearly \$27 million in Southampton Village. Salaries for mayors and trustees make up, on average, about a half percent of each village's budget, ranging from 0.28 percent in Quogue—\$22,000 in salaries from a \$7.9 million budget—to 0.87 percent in North Haven—\$11,500 in stipends in a roughly \$1.3 million budget.

“I think it's a recognition that what you're doing is valuable,” said Mr. Sartorius of Quogue. “I'm like anyone else—I'll take the money. It's not central, but I think it's fair.

“I'm here most days for full work days,” he continued. “I put in, sometimes, more than a full day. [I work] around 40 hours a week.”

The glaring exceptions are, once again, Sagaponack, which spends no part of its \$815,808 budget on elected officials, and West Hampton Dunes, which has budgeted \$92,000—or roughly 5.8 percent of its \$1.6 million budget for 2014-15—to pay the salaries of its elected officials. Elected leaders in West Hampton Dunes, however, do not receive health or dental benefits.

Don Louchheim, who helped establish the Village of Sagaponack, explained that the primary objective for incorporation was to reduce the tax burden on residents as much as possible, which he said also is the driving force behind not paying its elected representatives.

“It seemed right that we be unpaid volunteers,” Mr. Louchheim wrote in an email. “None of the members of our land use boards—ZBA, Architectural Review Board—or other committees are paid. Why should we have been different?”

Mr. Louchheim, who said he invests about 10 hours a week toward his mayoral duties, noted that Sagaponack was always meant to be a “barebones” village. With a population of a little more than 300 and a median household taking in more than \$105,000 annually, according the most recent U.S. Census data, Sagaponack also is among the wealthiest communities on the East End. In comparison, the average household income for the rest of Southampton Town was only \$78,815, according to the same data.

Although he hopes it does not happen, Mr. Louchheim said it is possible that his village will one day have to offer salaries to attract people to run for office. “But, in reality, it probably would be little more than an honorarium,” he wrote.

No Going Back

All eight East End mayors emphasized that their primary motivator for holding office is public service. Still, when asked if they would ever consider adopting a policy similar to Sagaponack’s—in which elected officials receive no pay or benefits—six of the seven mayors, with the exception of Mr. Sander of North Haven, said that going back is not something they would consider.

“I don’t see us going backward to that,” Mr. Sartorius said. “The trustees do spend a lot of time. The compensation isn’t that much but it is something.”

Mr. Gilbride, who estimates that he works between 20 and 30 hours a week in addition to his job with Emil Norsic and Sons Sanitation, said the Sag Harbor Village Board, as well as elected officials in other villages, have more responsibilities than their counterparts in Sagaponack. He also pointed out that, in most of the municipalities, the day-to-day duties tend to fall on the shoulders of paid full-time employees.

“Sagaponack’s a new village that’s just getting started, that’s still

contracting a lot with the town, so I'm not sure that's a model that could work elsewhere," Mr. Gilbride said. "The core people are the clerks and administrators in each one of these villages."

Mr. Sander, who has been in office for one year and took on the salary of his predecessor, Laura Nolan, said he is contemplating reducing his own salary during next year's budget cycle and possibly increasing the pay for the village's four trustees, who now each receive \$1,000 and no benefits. He added that he would be willing to consider going unpaid.

"I don't think the amount of time I've committed to spend on it has anything to do with the compensation," Mr. Sander said, estimating that he spends between 10 and 20 hours a week on mayoral duties. "It's my village, I love this village and I want to help in anyway possible."

Some mayors, including Mr. Sartorius and Mr. Epley, say their salaries are beneficial, if not necessary, for completing their duties and tasks that are outside the purview of their job descriptions, such as attending charitable events and other functions in their respective villages. Neither Quogue nor Southampton provides reimbursement for miles driven or cellphone use.

Mr. Epley estimates that he spends between 40 and 60 hours a week on his mayoral duties, in addition to his time spent working as president of the Seaford Center, a Westhampton Beachbased treatment center for drug and alcohol addiction. Mr. Epley noted that he donates all the money he makes as the mayor of Southampton to various charities while attending events held in and around the village.

"Anybody who thinks you're going into politics at the local level to make money is just simply mistaken," he said.

While many boards look to their contemporaries in other villages when deciding what they should be paid, Mr. Vegliante of West Hampton Dunes instead turns his sights on the private sector and, in turn, thinks that he's

being underpaid for the work he's done and continues to do.

Mr. Vegliante helped lead the incorporation effort for the village in the early 1990s and successfully sued the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for \$200 million to rebuild homes that were destroyed in a pair of nor'easters in 1991 and 1992. He is the only mayor in the history of the tiny, oceanfront village, which has a population of roughly 55 people, according to the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

“If I was CEO of a company that made the kind of turnaround this village has, I would be making much more than \$80,000,” Mr. Vegliante said during a recent interview. “Eighty thousand dollars is nothing. If this was the private sector, this would be quite a bit more. But I'm happy to do it for the community I love.”

The West Hampton Dunes mayor and trustees receive no benefits through the village.

Mr. Vegliante said it's up to the village's four trustees—each of whom is now paid \$3,000 a year—to set his salary, and if any of them had a problem with what he is being paid, they would change it. Likewise, he maintains voters would make their dissent known if they are opposed to his salary.

The longtime mayor said he would be in favor of raising the salaries of his fellow trustees if they ever suggest it, and said he thinks that all mayors on the East End should be paid more for what they do.

“I believe all these mayors deserve more money,” he said. “I don't know one mayor that's overpaid.”

Mr. Vegliante added that, if his salary were cut to the level of the other village mayors, he's not sure he would continue serving as mayor.

“That's really a tough question, because there's a reality to life, and the reality of life is you have to pay your bills,” the mayor said. “And if I'm

putting in all the time and effort into this job without getting paid for it, or having the opportunity to do something else, I would not be able to pay those bills.

“I don’t know if I could survive,” he continued. “I’d love to, but I really don’t know if I could.”