Salaries prove Nevada public employees can’t cry poor

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Nearly 1,000 state and local government workers, many of them firefighters and police, make more than $200,000 a year when all pay and benefits are counted, according to a 2011 pay analysis published by the Nevada Policy Research Institute.

The number of public employees earning $200,000 or more could be even higher, but the conservative think tank said some government entities, including the cities of Reno and Henderson, the Washoe County School District and the state of Nevada, did not provide information on the cost of benefits.

There were 932 public employees who hit the $200,000 mark in 2009, 1,174 in 2010 and 995 in the most recent data now available at Transparent Nevada.

The top salary spot in Nevada is held by William Zamboni with the Nevada System of Higher Education’s School of Medicine at $1.3 million in 2011, although much of his earnings are the result of income from his medical practice.

Las Vegas Assistant Sheriff Michael McClary earned nearly $545,000 in total compensation, according to the data provided to NPRI, while Chris Ault, football coach at the UNR earned $521,000.

Andy Matthews, president of NPRI, said that giving the public and policymakers access to the salary information helps ensure that critical data needed to make spending decisions is available for review by everyone.

Taxpayers can use the data to determine on their own if

government officials are being responsible with public money, he said.

Despite claims that government budgets are already stretched thin, the salary data suggests otherwise, Matthews said.

“There are still a lot of instances of overspending, and abnormally high government salaries at various levels of government here in our state, and this at a time when so many of us in the private sector are hurting, and Nevada’s families and business owners and individuals are really struggling,” he said. “I think it’s really a reminder that we have a ways to go still in terms of reigning in excessive government spending.”

A lot of the high salaries are at the local government level. Examples include a Clark County fire captain who brought in more than $525,000 in total compensation in 2011 and a UNLV English professor who received more than $326,000 in total compensation.

There are 145 Las Vegas police employees who earned more than $200,000 last year, and another 59 police and correction officers in North Las Vegas who exceeded $200,000 for the year.

A lot of the salaries need to be scrutinized, Matthews said.

“For example the base pay of the city clerk in North Las Vegas is more than $145,000,” he said. “Well, the base pay for Gov. (Bryan) Sandoval is just a little more than $143,000.”

Matthews said there is some good news in the 2011 data that suggests elected officials are responding to concerns about public salaries, particularly with firefighter salaries.

The number of firefighters earning more than $200,000 declined in 2011 compared to 2010, he said. For example, the number of Clark County fire fighters in that salary level came down from

199 in 2010 to 140 in 2011.

“I would say these numbers are still too high but at least represents some steps in the right direction,” Matthews said. “And I think that the fact that we at NPRI have started to publicize this information and make this known; I think that that certainly has played a role.”