Few rules = hefty payouts for public employees

By Joanna Lin, Center for Investigative Reporting

California taxpayers spend about $40 billion a year to pay their fire chiefs, mayors, tree trimmers and thousands of other city and county employees. Some – including harbor pilots in Los Angeles – make more than $300,000 a year. Others receive as little as $190, the payout for one planning commissioner in tiny Alpine County.

Although the salaries of government employees are public, most taxpayers know little about whether these paychecks, which typically represent more than a third of communities' spending, are fair.

No statewide standards govern how local pay is set, leaving the public in the dark about whether their city managers, for example, are paid appropriately for the job and the community.

With that in mind, The Center for Investigative Reporting analyzed four years of data – from California's 482 incorporated cities and 58 counties – to see what factors correlated with top officials' compensation. Most of the time, the larger a community and the higher its median rent, the more money its leaders tended to make.

But CIR's analysis, based on data that cities and counties report to the state controller, also found that top officials in a few communities bucked the trend, earning significantly more than their counterparts in similar places.

Butte and Yolo counties are about 90 miles apart in the Sacramento Valley and similar in size and living costs. In 2012, then-Butte Sheriff-Coroner Jerry Smith earned about $183,000 – about the same as his counterparts in similar counties. But Yolo Sheriff-Coroner Ed Prieto made almost 40 percent more – about $256,000.

The difference is largely explained by money Prieto received in lieu of retirement pay. Prieto, a retired California Highway Patrol captain, chose not to participate in Yolo's retirement system, so he receives extra pay equivalent to what the county would otherwise contribute to his pension, said Assistant County Administrator Mindi Nunes.

The analysis also showed that pay can spike significantly when officials leave office.

After Greg Johnson was forced to resign as city manager of Indian Wells, he became California's highest-paid municipal employee for 2011. His severance package included a year's salary and benefits and about $65,000 in unused vacation, administrative and sick leave. Johnson, whose desert resort town had about 5,000 residents and 39 people on its payroll, took in more than $677,000 that year, compared with his regular annual salary of nearly $255,000.

"I have to say, in hindsight, it's a very bad contract. Something none of us will let happen again," City Councilwoman Mary Roche said of the City Council's approval of the severance package, according to a news report at the time.

Wade McKinney, the current city manager, can bank far fewer leave hours under his contract than his predecessor could. If he were fired, his severance package would include nine months' salary and benefits instead of a year's.

Cities use severance packages as a powerful enticement when recruiting new leaders. State law limits a public employee's severance to 18 months' salary.

It's like an insurance policy for what can be a vulnerable position, said R. Craig Scott, an Orange County attorney who negotiates contracts for executives in the public and private sectors.

“They can, on any night the city council meets, find themselves unemployed,” he said. “By a 3-to-2 vote — they’re gone.”

In addition to promising severance pay, city manager contracts historically have not capped how much vacation time can be accrued, Scott said. That’s led to hefty payouts for some outgoing city managers.

When Buena Park City Manager Rick Warsinski retired in 2012, after working 33 years for the city, he cashed out $293,050 in unused vacation and sick time. With a salary of more than $239,000 and about $13,000 in other pay, including a cellphone allowance, he earned more than $545,000.

Some cities have capped leave accrual and shrunk severance packages since 2010, Scott said, after officials in the small Southern California city of Bell became embroiled in a public corruption scandal. Bell, where the former city manager earned more than $1 million a year, became a symbol of local government excess, prompting the League of California Cities to recommend compensation guidelines for city managers.

The guidelines call for establishing benchmark agencies, nearby communities that are similar in services provided, population served and the number of employees. The International City/County Management Association offers similar guidelines for government managers.

Other factors — such as a city’s political stability and the scope of an official’s responsibility — are “very hard to reduce to data points,” said Chris McKenzie, executive director of the League of California Cities.

Local governments don’t use uniform metrics for setting compensation, said Norman Roberts, a consultant whose Beverly Hills firm recruits public-sector executives. “You just kind of roll your eyeballs in the back of your head because there's no rhyme or reason in half the places."

Even when cities and counties try to establish fair compensation by benchmarking pay to outside factors, some employers and employees can cherry-pick data to get their desired paychecks.

San Bernardino is the only city in California where public safety compensation is not set by collective bargaining. Instead, police and fire department salaries are based on the average pay for comparable jobs in similarly sized cities.

How those cities are chosen is like a sports draft in reverse: Labor and management take turns striking cities from a list until only 10 remain. The initial pool of cities is based on only one factor: population.

The unique approach means that police pay this fiscal year is pegged to cities whose median rent is 14 to 102 percent higher than San Bernardino's.

In November, local voters rejected a ballot measure to replace the benchmarking process with collective bargaining. The city, which recently entered its third year of bankruptcy, calculates that police employee salaries will grow by about 4 percent this year.

The measure would not have fixed all of San Bernardino's financial woes, but it would have freed the city from "a financial straightjacket," said Thomas Pierce, an economics professor at California State University, San Bernardino who served on the city's charter review committee that recommended the proposition.

Up north in Contra Costa County, elected officials in October chose a pay benchmark that boosted their salaries by 33 percent – to more than $129,000.

The Board of Supervisors – whose members already earned about what could be expected based on Contra Costa's size and cost of living – voted to set their salaries at 70 percent of a superior court judge's pay. They chose the formula, which is similar to ones used by several counties in the state, after surveying how other San Francisco Bay Area counties paid their supervisors.

"Nobody wants to be at the bottom. You're always trying to be in the middle," said Supervisor Candace Andersen, who cast the board's only dissenting vote. "You escalate just because everyone else has set theirs at the median."

However, when county employees tried to use some of the same Bay Area counties to negotiate higher pay, county officials said those counties' larger budgets made them inappropriate comparisons.

"For employees, I hate to say it, but it was a slap in the face to them," said Andersen, who is taking the 4 percent raise that other county employees received instead of the 33 percent bump for supervisors.

Surveying salaries in other communities ratchets up pay over time, as local governments try to stay competitive, said Nestor Enrique Valencia, the current mayor of Bell. That puts some communities at a disadvantage, he said.

To even the playing field, state law should cap the amount of vacation and sick time that public employees can cash out, Valencia said. Bell limits payouts for unused vacation time to 360 hours and sick time to between 100 and 1,500 hours, depending on the type of employee.

His city now suffers, he said, for getting out in front of the issue.

"Who's going to come work for the city of Bell," he said, "when they know they could get these other benefits elsewhere?”

CIR reporters Jennifer Gollan and Emmanuel Martinez contributed to this story. It was edited by Jennifer LaFleur and copy edited by Stephanie Rice and Nikki Frick.

Wise dominates at Grand Prix

By USSA

A heated early season battle went down Dec. 5 at the first stop of the Sprint U.S Grand Prix tour in Copper Mountain, Colo., with Olympic Champion David Wise of Reno and New Zealander Janina Kuzma taking home top honors.

The new three run, best run counts format gave today’s finalist a lot of opportunity for progression, but Wise’s consistent skiing and back-to-back double cork prowess set the stage early in the game. Wise won the contest with his first run of the day in which he linked right and left double cork 1260s.

Second and third place finishers Torin Yater-Wallace and Benoit Valentin favored the three run format, mixing up their tricks and upping their scores as the day progressed. Alex Ferierra and current AFP World Champion Kevin Rolland finished just off the podium in fourth and fifth, respectively. U.S. Freeskiing teammates Gus Kenworthy and Aaron Blunk rounded out the top seven.

Progression was the name of the game on the women’s side as well, with Kiwi skier Janina Kuzma landing her first 900 in competition and simultaneously landing herself on the top of the podium. Olympic slopestyle silver medalist Devin Logan nabbed second place with her stellar first run combo of a left 720 mute to switch alley-oop 540. Olympic halfpipe silver medalist from Japan Ayana Onozuka walked away with third place just edging out American Annalisa Drew.

Free radon kits available to Nevadans

Free radon test kits are available now through Feb. 28 at University of Nevada Cooperative Extension offices and partner offices statewide.

Nevadans are encouraged to test their homes for this radioactive, colorless gas that comes from the ground, accumulates in homes and can cause lung cancer.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates 21,000 Americans die each year from radon-caused lung cancer, killing more people than secondhand smoke, drunken driving, falls in the home, drowning or house fires.

A simple three-day test can determine if a house has a radon problem, and winter is an ideal time to test a home for radon.

In Nevada, one in four Nevada homes tested found radon concentrations at or above the EPA action level. According to experts, living in a home with radon concentrations at the action level poses as much risk of developing lung cancer as smoking half a pack of cigarettes a day. If radon problems are found, they can be fixed.

For more information, call 888.723.6610.

Mancuso makes a name for herself as big-wave surfer

By Grant Davis, Outside

Weeks before the start of the World Cup ski racing season, Julia Mancuso decided to go surfing. That's not so unusual – Mancuso has long surfed from her off-season base in Maui.

This time, however, the Squaw Valley ski racer chose to try the thunderous wave Cloudbreak in Fiji, using a tow-in assist from a jet ski to notch four rides on the double-head-high swell.

The photos of her session show her charging down the face of a beastly wave with all the poise of the veteran ski racer she is.

We caught up with the four-time Olympic medalist to ask how surfing big waves helps her ski – and if she sees any future in the water.

Read the whole story

7.6% in U.S. are depressed, few seek treatment

By Karen Kaplan, Los Angeles Times

About 1 in 13 Americans was suffering from depression at some point between 2009 and 2012, yet only 35 percent of people with severe depression and 20 percent of those with moderate depression said they had sought help from a mental health professional, according to a report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That's troubling, the report authors write, because therapy combined with medication is "the most effective treatment for depression, especially for severe depression." Drugs might be prescribed by a primary care doctor, but only a mental health specialist would conduct the type of therapy needed to get well.

The report, from the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, offers a snapshot of the nation's mental state during recent years.

Read the whole story

Retirement tools for the new year

By Carl Edwards

Wow, what an amazing market ride over the last few years. Running on tracks laid by an unprecedented Federal Reserve monetary easing program, the market has once again run to new all-time highs and appears to still have some steam. Or does it?

While no one really knows the answer to this, it is important to remember history as a guide, and to think about the future

– your future. It wasn’t all that long ago that the world’s financial system was shaken to its core, leaving many retirees running for shelter from the Ebola-like symptoms displayed by world financial systems. Fear over which institution or country would next display the almost certain deadly symptoms ran rampant.

I am certainly not echoing the calls of the past and screaming it’s time to get your guns and gold. I am, however, pointing out to consumers the recent and vivid reminders of the importance to get back to the basics with your financial planning this New Year. If we fail to remember the past, we repeat it. You have worked too hard preparing for this time in your life.

Let’s review three vital elements you should implement in your retirement plan this New Year.

• Get your annual financial check-up. How can we possibly forget to do this? Annual check-ups are the No. 1 preventative care tool at our disposal. While many individuals should be meeting more regularly with their financial advisor, everyone should have at least the minimum of an annual visit. Problems creep up and this is often the best way to catch them before it is too late.

• Don’t forget to diversify. Are you working with a broker who always wants to sell you mutual funds full of stocks and bonds? Does your annuity guy think every dime you have should be stuffed into insurance products? The reality is they are probably both wrong. Find an advisor this year who knows the benefits of each of these products, but who also knows the value of how they work together. Diversification is important and it may include each of these products along with other assets such as individual stocks and bonds, certificates of deposit (structured and fixed), business development companies, real estate investment trusts, precious metals, and numerous other investments.

• Rebalance, rebalance, rebalance. With the great equity run up we have encountered since the lows of March 2009, it is vital to remember that we must continue to evaluate our investment portfolios. While equity portfolios have risen significantly since that time, other areas of our portfolio may not have fared so well, leaving our risk levels in need of adjustment. It is often a good idea to capture some of those hard-earned gains. You never know — the next major pullback could be just around the corner. Be prudent, not greedy.

Carl Edwards is a chartered financial consultant and is the owner of C.E. Wealth Group.

Prizes for coyote hunting banned by Calif. panel

By Angel Jennings, Los Angeles Times

California Fish and Game officials vote to prohibit contests for hunting coyotes and other nongame animals
The California Fish and Game Commission voted Wednesday to ban hunting contests that award prizes for nongame animals such as coyotes, beavers and bobcats.

In a 4-1 vote, the commission prohibited "giving inducements of any kind" in hunting contests for "nongame species and fur-bearing animals," said Clark Blanchard, a Fish and Game spokesman. The ban will put an end to organized coyote hunts in rural parts of California that awarded up to $500 and other gifts to top hunters.

The ban is expected to take effect in early 2015.

Read the whole story

LTVA, STR collecting goods for Christmas Cheer

The Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority and the South Tahoe Refuse Company are teaming up this holiday season to make giving to Christmas Cheer easier than ever.

The LTVA's Drive and Drop for Christmas Cheer takes place Dec. 8-13 from 9am-5pm. Drive through the visitor center parking lot at 3066 Highway 50, South Lake Tahoe to drop donations of food or toys into the bins provided by South Tahoe Refuse.

South Tahoe Refuse is also having its Community Holiday Food & Toy Drive Dec. 8-12. Leave canned/packaged food or toys curbside on your regular collection day, or drop off at South Tahoe Refuse, 2140 Ruth Ave., South Lake Tahoe during business hours.

Christmas Cheer feeds more than 450 families all year.

For more information, call 530.541.5255.

Top EDC official named in

suit by ex-employee

By Kathryn Reed

The woman who is acting chief administrative officer for El Dorado County is being sued by a former employee who worked for her when she was CAO in Alpine County.

Robert Levy, former undersheriff of Alpine County, in the 19-page lawsuit alleges Pam Knorr along with three supervisors at the time and a private citizen violated his civil rights, conspired to do so, discriminated against him based on age, failed to prevent discrimination and retaliation, violated the Public Safety Officers' Procedural Bill of Rights Act, and defamed him.

"Her theory was a younger, cheaper workforce was better," Jeanette Viduay, investigator with the Watts Law Office, told *Lake Tahoe News*. The Folsom-based firm is representing Levy.

Gayle Tonon of Truckee is representing all of the defendants, but did not return multiple calls.

"Generally I can say sometimes counties settle items and sometimes they choose to litigate. I think there are good reasons behind each of those choices," Knorr told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She is confident in the job she did in Alpine County, stating, "I sleep like a baby every night."

Pam Knorr, temporary head of El Dorado County and former CAO of Alpine County, is a defendants in a labor lawsuit.

Knorr deferred further comment to Tonon.

(Knorr was hired to be the human resources director for El Dorado County, and still is, in addition to be acting chief administrative officer because of CAO Terri Daly’s departure last month and Assistant CAO Kim Kerr leaving later this month. She worked for Alpine County from 2008-13.)

When Knorr left Alpine County the chairman of the Board of Supervisors wrote a glowing letter dated Aug. 9, 2013, on her behalf. In part it says, “Most importantly, Pamela took on the mantle of CAO at a difficult time for the county and made vast improvements in our operations. It was with reluctance that the Board of Supervisors accepted her resignation and she would be welcome back here at any time.”

Terry Woodrow signed the letter. Woodrow is still on the board.

Also named in the suit are former Supervisors Tom Sweeney and Phillip Bennett, current Supervisor Don Jardine, and Nancy Thornburg, volunteer assistant archivist for Alpine County.

Viduay, with the firm representing the employee who filed the suit, said, “(Levy) wants the truth to come out about Pamela

Knorr. I, like him, don't believe she should be the CEO of any county. She is like a snake charmer."

Viduay said Knorr was able to charm three of the supervisors, which when it comes to a five-member board is all that is needed.

Levy had been undersheriff since 2000, though he worked for the sheriff's department since 1995.

The court filings say, "In the aftermath of county and Knorr harassing, attacking, and demoting plaintiff, these defendants assigned certain of plaintiff's job duties – including certain law enforcement tasks as well as tasks related to plaintiff's years-long work on county communications projects – to individuals who possessed inferior job qualifications and experience, and who were significantly younger than plaintiff. As a direct, foreseeable, and proximate result of defendants' discriminatory actions, plaintiff has suffered and continues to suffer substantial losses in earnings and related employment benefits, and has suffered and continues to suffer extreme emotional distress, humiliation, damage to his professional reputation, and diminished employment advancement opportunities in his chosen profession, all to his damage in an amount to be proven at trial."

Letter: TRYP appreciative of community

To the community,

The Tahoe Regional Young Professionals board of directors and members would like to say thank you to the Lake Tahoe Visitors

Authority and American Century golf for continued support and concern for our residents.

Thank you for your continuous support of our commitment to retain and attract young professionals who are driven and enthusiastic about doing business in our region. With your help, we are keeping our young professionals informed and engaged, while attracting others to move to our area. We hope to continue to work with the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority and American Century for years to come.

We would also like to express our most sincere appreciation for all of those who attended, donated to, hosted or sponsored our Winter White Holiday Party on Nov. 22. Thanks to all of you, our event was a huge success and enabled us to make a significant donation to Sierra Family Services' Project 44, which strives to find foster homes for local kids.

We were taken aback with all of the generosity shown by our host at the Riva Grill, as well as our numerous silent auction, raffle and monetary donors. Although we regretfully cannot list the names of each and every individual donor and business, we our forever grateful and look forward to your continued support at next year's Winter White Holiday Party.

Tahoe Regional Young Professionals