

## Hillsborough County employees to get pay increases

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TAMPA - Thousands of Hillsborough County government employees will receive pay raises this year as county officials try to close the growing gap between government and private-sector salaries.

Five years of budget cuts and pay freezes have caused county government salaries to fall well behind those for similar positions in the private sector, according to a recent civil service study. County officials say the higher pay at local businesses is luring highly trained government workers with lots of experience.

Tax collector Doug Belden said his agency's customer service representatives are making 20 percent less than people with the same type job in a bank. He is budgeting a 3.5 percent pay increase for fiscal year 2014.

"My employees work hard, and historically we probably have had the lowest turnover rates of any county agency," Belden said. "But the private sector is improving, and they're going over to the private sector for a few dollars more."

Of the 104 customer service representatives hired to work in the tax collector's office in the past two years, 34 have left. Belden says it typically takes a year to fully train a representative. The money and time lost through high employee turnover cancel the savings from frozen salaries, he said.

County Administrator Mike Merrill referenced the same problem in mid-April when he told county commissioners he intended to raise the salaries of nearly all the 4,500 employees who report to him. In a memo to commissioners, Merrill said the county had "lost sight" of its obligation to provide county employees equitable compensation.

"In fact, as the economy is beginning to improve, we have witnessed some of our best and brightest being recruited," Merrill said in the memo, "and some have left to take other, more-lucrative positions."

Most of the county administrator's employees got a 3.5 percent cost-of-living increase that went

into effect March 1. The pay increase will bring the county's lowest-paid employees up to \$10.06 an hour, a rate considered a "living wage," according to a calculator developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Other employees under the county administrator got raises ranging from \$280 to \$29,248 for taking on more responsibilities and authority. Merrill also brought the annual salaries of his executive team up to \$165,000 each, with raises ranging from \$5,006 to \$26,098.

Pat Frank, clerk of the circuit court, announced last week she intended to give all the office's 766 full-time employees a 5 percent raise, which will show up in the employees' next pay check.

Frank said she felt justified in giving 5 percent because of a Civil Service Board labor study that showed her workers were being paid, on average, 7 percent less than other county employees and workers in the private sector doing similar jobs.

It's not the 7 percent," she said, "but it's a step in that direction."

The clerk's office has been hard hit during the past five years by state budget cuts. Last year, 30 positions were eliminated, mostly through attrition. Since 2008, the office's workforce fell from 900 to 766, Frank said.

Raises have been nonexistent, she said, though twice employees were given a \$1,500 bonus. One came from the county, which gave all its employees the windfall; the other was due to the federal government unexpectedly reimbursing the clerk's office money after a yearslong child-support collection dispute.

Frank said she has worried for some time that the stagnant salaries would prompt valuable employees to jump to the private sector or other government agencies. "It's a drain we can't afford," Frank said.

Other so-called "constitutional offices" — sheriff, property appraiser and elections supervisor — also are planning pay raises. Property appraiser Bob Henriquez said he is budgeting a 3.5 percent raise for his 132 employees, and supervisor of elections Craig Latimer has budgeted a \$2,000 one-time stipend for the office's 36 employees, said Gerri Kramer, a spokeswoman for the office.

Chief Deputy Joe Docobo said the sheriff's office plans to give 1,104 of its 2,069 sworn deputies step-pay increases. The remaining deputies are not eligible for raises because they have reached the top of their pay grade or because of performance or disciplinary problems.

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