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Open letter to Riverside City Council : On Nov. 6 the Riverside City Council voted itself a 60 percent pay raise. They ratified that decision Nov. 13. Before that vote, Jack B. Clarke Jr., president the Raincross Club, an organization of business and community leaders that deals with local public-policy issues, presented this letter on behalf of the group.

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This letter is to all of the members of the (Riverside) City Council to raise concerns which the Raincross Club has about the manner in which the council has acted on some recent city issues. We do not intend any portions of this to be construed as a personal or professional criticism toward any member of the council.

Instead, the Raincross Club sees this time as an important one for the city, and as a time of opportunity for the advancement of Riverside. It is in that context we raise these points.

In order to give focus to the concerns Raincross has, we will use, as an example, the City Council's decision last week to give itself a 60 percent increase in yearly compensation. This decision raised several issues.

First, the council's decision seemed to give very little weight to the work done by the city's appointed Salary Commission. That commission met numerous times. It interviewed the members of the council as well as members of the city staff. It examined data from both inside and outside the city structure and, after significant deliberations, the commission proposed reasoned recommendations to the council.

The Raincross Club is aware that a council commission is advisory in nature. Even so, the City Council's action concerning its salary structure did not seem to appreciate or recognize the work done by the unpaid volunteers who served on the Salary Commission. Numerous volunteers diligently work on Riverside boards and commissions. If it becomes apparent the City Council really does not give credence to commission recommendations, the council can damage the integrity of Riverside's system of boards and commissions and its system of checks and balances.

Why should volunteers serve on those boards and commissions when their opinions are not given serious consideration? If the council believed the Salary Commission had erred in its analysis, then we believe the council should have directly addressed the Salary Commission's report and recommendations.

Second, the salary increase and the way it was implemented raises significant policy issues about what role a city councilperson should play in city government. From public comments made by various councilpersons, it appears the council believes that serving as a city councilperson is a full-time job and that, therefore, the council should receive full-time pay.

The Raincross Club believes that the issue of whether a city councilperson should receive full-time or part-time compensation should be the subject of public debate and should not be legislated indirectly as the council did last week.

For example, there are many reasons for the City Council positions to be part-time jobs. Among the reasons are that city councilpersons should be policymakers and not managers. If city councilpersons are regularly rolling up their sleeves and getting involved, on a management level, with the details of planning issues, engineering issues, traffic issues, redevelopment issues, code enforcement issues, general plan matters, specific plan matters, park and recreation issues, personal matters, and the multitude of other functions which the city performs, then it would not be full-time job, it would be an impossible job.

It would be an impossible job because there would not be enough hours in the day to perform all those functions. More importantly, elected officials cannot in a lifetime acquire the expertise in the number of disciplines it takes to run a city. Instead, the City Manager and department heads, who are experts in their fields, should be required to handle the management of those City functions and should be accountable when those efforts fall short of expectations.

Moreover, if the council makes its members into de facto full-time councilpersons, the council would be placing a significant barrier to persons in the community who might be interested in pursuing a position on the City Council.

As you know better than anyone, Riverside is one of the fastest growing communities in California, and, indeed, the nation. In order to deal with the complex issues which will result from the changes accompanying that growth, it is very important that the electorate have the opportunity to have a large pool of candidates from which to choose. If the City Council sits as policymakers, then it can and should be a part-time job. If it becomes full-time, the very fact of it being full-time will exclude all but those people who either no longer need to work, or have job positions of such flexibility that they can devote less than full time to their careers. We would submit that those people are a small portion of our population.

Instead, City Council positions should be arranged in such a way that qualified people, who have sufficient time to devote to local government, have the opportunity to run for the City Council. We want to emphasize that this point is not an effort to unseat any city councilperson or a criticism of any sitting councilperson, it is a reality.

We believe the issue of having councilpersons serve as policymakers needs to be emphasized. Under our City Charter we have a strong City Manager form of government. One of the council's most important powers is the ability to hire City staff persons with the expertise to run the City day-to-day and to help participate in creating a vision for the City. The Raincross Club is concerned that the if the City Council sees itself as full-time elected city employees, that the effectiveness of the City Manager and the department heads may be compromised by having elected officials essentially acting as de facto managers.

In that regard, the Raincross Club would note parenthetically that the City Council should be applauded for hiring the new City Manager; he seems to be doing a good job. He has waded out into the community in a way that is refreshing. He has been presented with many challenges in this city; challenges such as dealing with vacancies in key positions, trying to help address disturbing acts such as the recent shootings of two of our teenagers and trying to get a sense of a community into which he has just relocated. He seems to be willing to take on all of these issues and we hope that he will be given the support he needs to either succeed or fail based on reasonable expectations of performance.

Third, the Raincross Club is concerned by the 60 percent pay increase in light of the pending financial constraints created by a variety of economic factors not the least of which is the difficulty confronted by our (California) state budget. In a situation where Riverside may face real challenges from a budgetary perspective and, at some point may have to consider cutting programs and people, the Raincross Club believes that it was questionable for the City Council to take the action it did.

The Raincross Club wants to emphasize that we believe that these are exciting times for Riverside. With the city's growth, there is change and with change there are positive opportunities available. Over the years, this City Council has made many decisions which have been for Riverside's collective good. The Raincross Club has every confidence that this council will continue to make those types of decisions and we look forward to working with the council in any way we can.

These issues were the subject of substantial discussion among the membership of Raincross and this letter is a composite of the ideas of many members; there was no one person who submitted these ideas or who authored these words.

Caption: 2001 ; THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE ; Chuck Beaty, Ameal Moore and other members of the Riverside City Council in chambers.

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