

UNEVEN REWARDS TO COUNTY BOARDS

By William Nicoson

The thin alphabet gruel in the payroll labyrinth nourishing Fairfax County's bureaucracy is not shared with any consistency among boards of commissioners and directors whose work for county citizens deserves at least a sip of soup.

Members of the board of the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) have received no compensation for their services since FY1997. That was the year of the great budget crunch when the county eliminated payments to virtually all board members of county authorities, commissions, and the like. But we now live in a time of fiscal surpluses. Frank de la Fe, a Reston resident who chairs the FCPA board, has sent a memo to Kate Hanley, who chairs the county Board of Supervisors, requesting that stipends for FCPA board members be revived.

De la Fe points out that the FY2001 budget provides \$15,000 in compensation to each member of the Planning Commission, and he seeks only one-fifth of this munificent sum for his own board members, paid in monthly instalments. He further notes that FCPA manages 19,000 acres of land at a projected cost of \$66 million in FY2001. He is correct that his board has a substantial fiduciary responsibility worthy of compensation.

Eleven members of the School Board are paid \$12,000 per year and the chairman \$13,000. Nine voting board members of the Fairfax County Water Authority are paid \$7,500 per year and the chairman \$10,000. The 11 commissioners of the Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RHA) were paid \$100 per meeting prior to FY1997 when their compensation was eliminated. RHA has requested, and the supervisors have agreed, that beginning in July, 2000, compensation will be restored to RHA commissioners in the amount of \$150 per month.

But FCPA is not alone in bearing uncompensated burdens for the benefit of county citizens. No one receives compensation for services on the 12-member Fairfax County Library Board (FCLB), nor on the 10-member Architectural Review Board (ARB), nor on the 20-member History Commission, nor on the 14-member Environmental Quality Advisory Council nor on numerous committees created to advise supervisors on a range of issues. Because members of the ARB must be professionals (at least 2 architects, 1 landscape architect, 1 lawyer plus experts in related fields such as archeology, history or real estate), the argument for professional compensation is strong. Prior to the infamous FY1997 budget, FCLB and ARB members received \$50 per meeting.

Then there's the 7-member board of the county's Economic Development Authority (EDA). The legislation authorizing EDA permits Fairfax County to compensate EDA commissioners, but none have ever sought compensation. EDA deserves substantial credit for building a county job-base over the last ten years which is the envy of counties nationwide. Surely this board deserves more than thanks from Fairfax citizens.

The de la Fe memorandum should prod Fairfax County supervisors to review the issue of compensation for board members of all county commissions, authorities and councils. Then the supervisors should adopt a consistent policy for all such compensation which deserves protection, by the new “rainy-day” budget reserves, from being sacrificed once again in the next economic downturn.

William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers.