

Supervisors Focus on Challenges of Understaffed Roads Department

August 11, 2024



The Board of Supervisors addressed County Roads Division challenges and disparities at its Tuesday's meeting.

In the wake of learning Roads gas tax revenues were not being fully utilized, the Board of Supervisors has authorized Department heads to bypass current level salary steps and hire desperately needed employees to fill long-term vacancies. Supervisors will now be able to hire up to Level C step for positions deemed hard to fill, especially experienced operators of heavy equipment. The challenge to hire is particularly egregious and problematic within County Roads and Sheriff's Departments

Supervisors acknowledged the authorization to bypass entry level to higher step levels is a tool to hire Roads Department staff allowing imperative work to be initiated and completed. \$1.5 million in the last two years in SB 1 State funds. Accumulated gas tax funding remains substantially unspent due to lack of experienced staff.

Retired Roads Superintendent Jeff Daniels worked for over 30 years in Del Norte Roads, addressed the Board stating, “ It comes down to safety. There needs to be a salary increase and (the increase) needs to be significant. Roads maintenance is a difficult and dangerous job. I’ve been there when (a Roads worker) someone has lost their life. People get hit by cars doing their job.”

Sheriff Garrett Scott commended the effort for flexibility to hire deputies at higher step levels. Department heads stated money is the major issue in hiring and retaining staff.

Supervisor Valerie Starkey claimed the money incentive looks good on paper but the formula is not effective. She lamented she would support the authorization but anticipated difficulty in implementing the tool.

Chairman / Supervisor Dean Wilson said the flexibility relates to hiring and not necessarily retention of new employees.

The Board approved the authorization unanimously.

On a related matter involving only the Roads Department following the vote, the Board approved and adopted a Side Letter Agreement with the Del Norte County Employees Association (SEIU) Local 1021 to waive the paragraph addressing the Memorandum of Understanding allowing the implementation to hire at above Level A.

Norma Williams, SEIU Union representative signed off on approval of the Side Letter. Public Speaker Sam Strait perceived ensuing chaos, with other Departments expediently seeking emergency status.

The vote was unanimous.

Still later in the Meeting, Item number 15 sought to reclassify positions within Roads Division, as requested by Community Development Director Heidi Kunstal. Discussion and strong arguments were made on both sides of Roads classification item.

Wilson opposed what he called, a “hasty decision” while the Board awaits a consultant’s report expected four to six months out. Wilson shared, “ the County has a newly adopted Strategic Plan that prioritizes Roads and Sheriff Department.” He labeled the pending motion hasty and wasteful as money has already been authorized and spent and data has yet to be delivered. “Let’s await the consultant’s report before acting,” he asked for.

Howard concurred and shared his concern for a lack of an administrative mechanism to address wage and retention disparities as his reasoning for opposing the motion.

The discourse among supervisors and CAO Lopez was comprehensive and informative.

The vote to approve salary range adjustments for the Roads Dept was 3-2:

Short: YES

Starkey: YES.

BORGES: YES

Howard: NO

Wilson: NO

The Board meets again Tuesday, August 13, 10am inn the Flynn Center.