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# Top-heavy CVRD wages out of control

**In my opinion:** Salary climb out of line

**A**s the Cowichan Valley Regional District prepares a tax increase of 8% or more, with inflation under 1%, beleaguered taxpayers are left wondering "How did this happen?"

The single largest item in the CVRD budget is staff salaries. Remarkably, information on salaries is not available in the raft of budget information provided by the CVRD. Fortunately, the CVRD is required by law to produce a Public Bodies Report, which gives detailed information on staff salaries and expenses, available on the CVRD website.

The bulk of CVRD staff is unionized and has received wage increases of about 2.5% in recent years. This is better than many in the community, especially considering the benefits and job security, but perhaps not embarrassingly out of line. However the biggest growth in salaries by far has been at the top end, the group of 34-plus CVRD "exempt staff" who were paid between \$75,000 and \$178,000 in 2011, the most recent available.

The amount paid to this group has grown dramatically, from \$1.6 million in 2007 to \$3.4 million in 2011, a whopping 211% increase. This is the elephant in the room. The number of people in this top group doubled between 2007 and 2011, and they all received generous pay increases. By comparison, the amount paid CVRD staff earning under \$75,000 grew only 13% for the same period.

A CVRD human resources manager wrote me that "for the past few years the increases for exempt employees have been identical to those received by all other employee groups." That would mean increases of about 2.5% a year, or slightly over 10% over a four year period. However, the Public Bodies Report tells a different story.

- Corporate manager \$147,290, up 19%
- Development manager \$137,941, up 27.6%
- Parks and rec manager \$130,562, up 32.8%
- Engineering manager \$132,952, up 30.3%
- Parks and trails manager, \$101,700, up 33.9%
- Finance manager \$102,872, up 26.7%
- Community planning manager \$113,361, up 32%
- Water management manager \$106,200, up 24.6%
- Corporate secretary, \$105,419, up 21.4%
- Administrator, \$178,615 (2007 unavailable)

The report details similar increases for most of the 34 "exempt staff." And this doesn't include travel expenses, employee benefits, and good pensions, which increase in cost as salaries rise.

Apparently, pay increases of "2.5% a year" aren't quite the whole story for the top staff. The CVRD tries to explain this, citing "merit increases" and "expanded responsibilities" and the like, but this is simply not a credible explanation for such large increases to so many top staff.

Our elected directors have the power to stop the excessive wages from continuing to grow. Directors have approved these increases, year after year. Whether the directors knew what they were doing, or simply didn't bother to look beyond the smoke screen provided by CVRD management, is an open question.

The 2013 budget is set to be approved tonight. Shawnigan Director Bruce Fraser has said he will propose a cap or "redline" on future salary increases for top earners.

Let's hope the majority of his fellow directors read the public mood correctly, and support his motion. The ever-expanding expense at the top must be halted before it reaches truly crippling levels.

*Blaise Salmon is a Mill Bay resident.*