

ISSUE BRIEF 

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**Compensation of Metro Council Members:
East Baton Rouge City-Parish in Comparison**

The men and women elected to serve on city councils and similar bodies play an important role in local government and in community leadership across the United States. Compensation for individual council members can vary markedly due to differences in municipal government roles and variation among local political cultures. It is important to occasionally review the compensation of our elected officials to determine whether it is fair and appropriate in light of evolving expectations and requirements.

In Baton Rouge, the Metropolitan Council (or “Metro Council”) acts in conjunction with the Mayor-President as the single governing authority for both the City of Baton Rouge and Parish of East Baton Rouge (EBR), serving a total population of roughly 430,000 to 460,000. As such, the twelve Metro Council members represent districts averaging roughly 37,500 residents. The base salary of Metro Council members (\$300 per month) has remained the same since its original passage in 1966, although members also receive a state-funded car allowance of \$800 per month. During a Metro Council meeting earlier this year, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber was asked to perform a comparison of the compensation of Metro Council members and their counterparts in other communities. This issue brief examines the historical compensation trends of the Metro Council and provides the results of a BRAC-administered survey of the compensation packages of 39 cities of comparable size.

BRAC’s survey and analysis suggests that:

There are valid arguments for both low and high levels of compensation, with no apparent consensus among surveyed cities

Since 1966, total compensation for the EBR Metro Council has declined when adjusted for inflation by over 40 percent while average district size has increased by over 40 percent

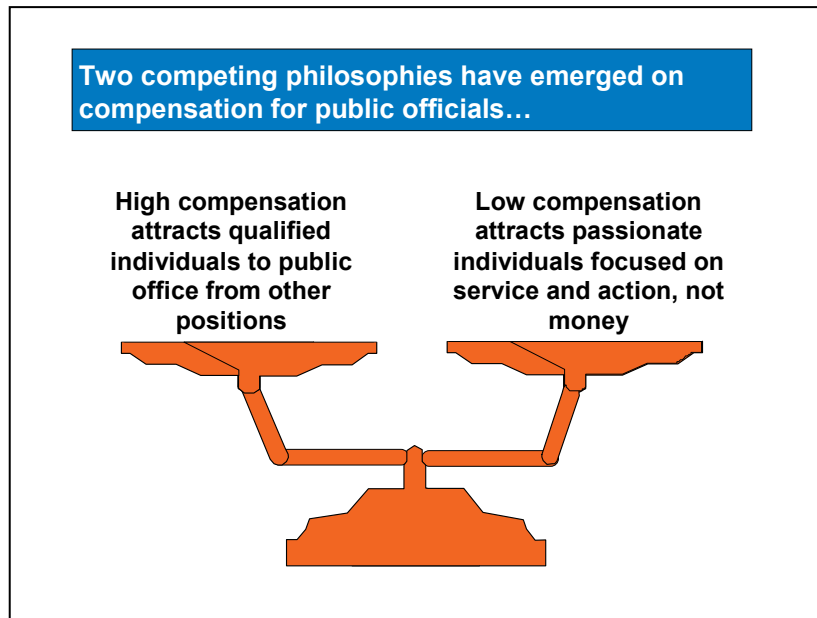
City council service for large U.S. cities requires a substantial time commitment—on average over 40 hours per week

EBR Metro council member compensation and its number of council-dedicated staff are substantially lower than those in most other peer cities

Philosophies on the compensation of public officials

Policy literature presents competing philosophical views on the compensation of city council members and other elected officials. According to the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, “some contend that compensation should be set high enough to make such positions attractive to qualified individuals. They suggest that high salaries will be an incentive to get better people to seek positions as parish [or city] councilmen.” The National Civic League, in its Model

County Charters publication, presents a different view: “In general, salaries of...council members should be nominal. It is doubtful that substantial salaries will attract better members. On the contrary, experience suggests that a generous salary is apt to attract candidates who are interested more in the income than in [public] affairs and the opportunity for public service.”

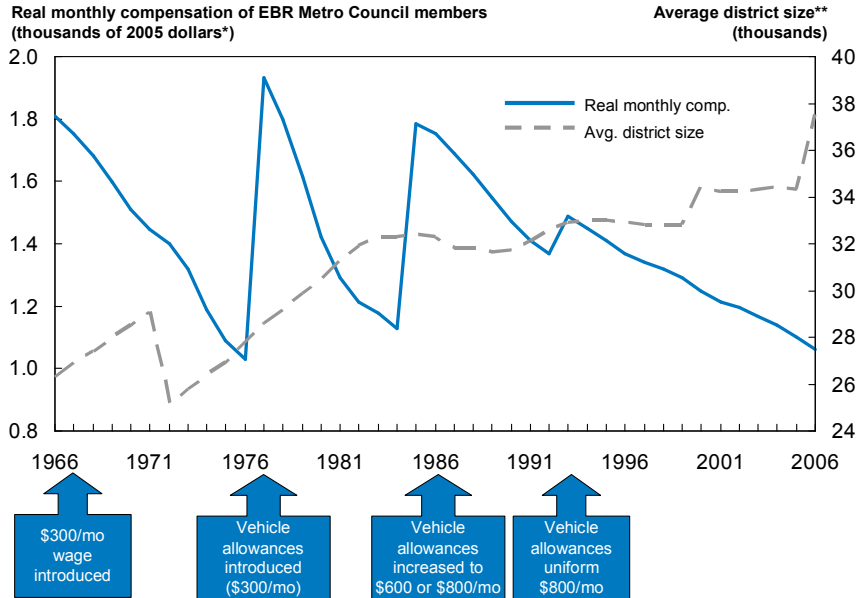


History of compensation in EBR

The Metro Council was established in 1949; however, city councilmen and women were not compensated until 1966 when an amendment to the Plan of Government provided each council member a salary of \$300 per month. Vehicle allowances were introduced at \$300 per month plus mileage reimbursements in 1977. This vehicle allowance has since been increased to the present-day \$800 per month for all council members.

From 1966 to the present day, EBR Parish has grown by over 40 percent, bringing with it an increasing structural and administrative complexity. Council members today face a larger constituency and increasingly complex matters of public concern. However, Metro Council members are compensated roughly 40 percent less in dollars adjusted for inflation than they were in 1966. Revisions to the Metro Council’s vehicle allowance schedule have raised compensation but have not kept pace with inflation.

SINCE 1966, TOTAL COMPENSATION HAS FALLEN OVER 40% WHILE AVERAGE DISTRICT SIZE HAS INCREASED BY AT LEAST 40%



* Mileage reimbursements used from 1977 to 1985 are not included in compensation estimate

** Number of council members increased from 10 to 12 in 1972

Source: EBR City-Parish Budget Office; U.S. Census Bureau; BRAC analysis

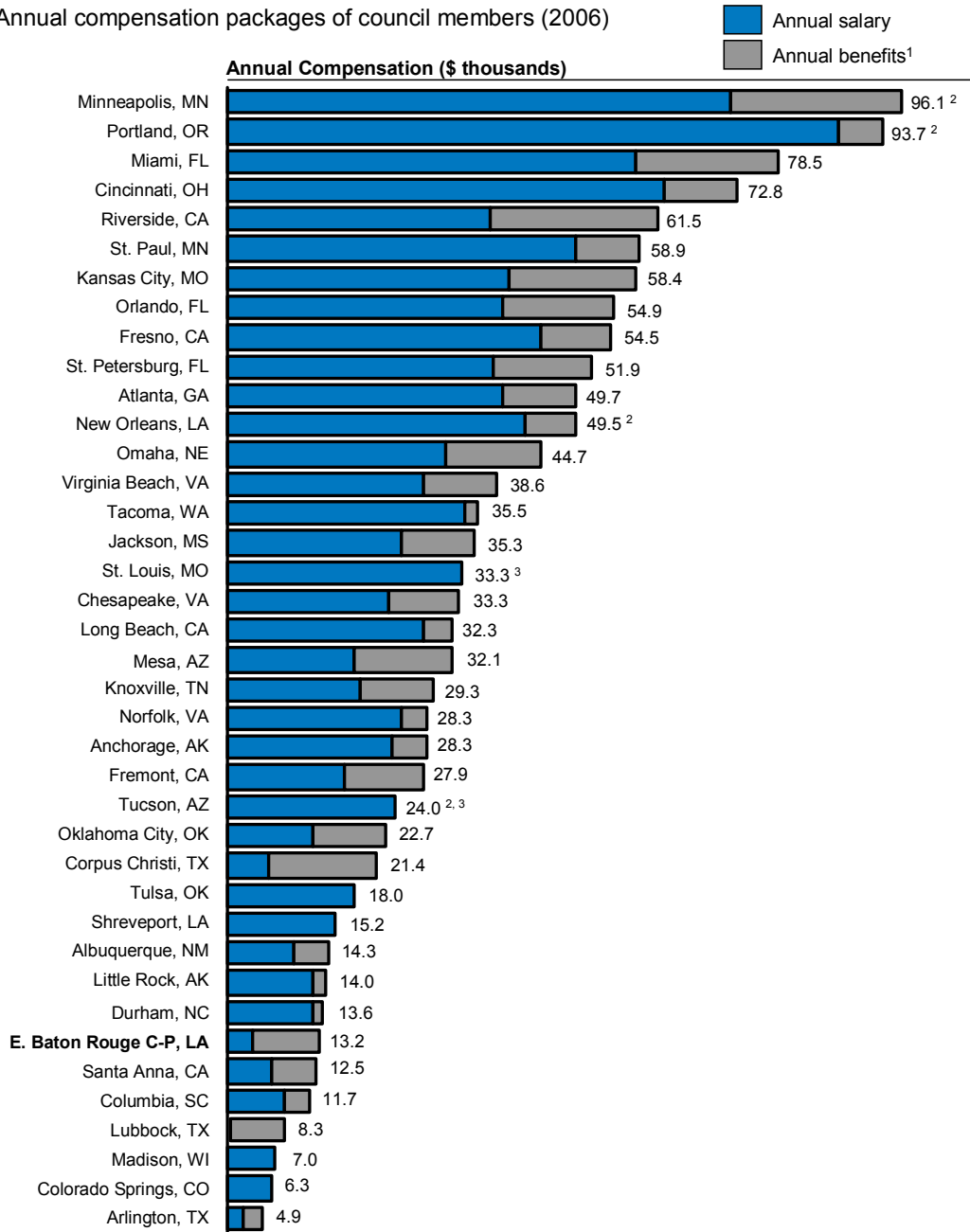
Comparison of compensation in EBR to other cities

Results of a BRAC survey of city councils show compensation packages ranging widely from \$4,850 to \$96,000 per year. Median total compensation for council members was \$32,300 per year and the mean was \$35,500 per year. The EBR Metro Council (\$13,200 per year) ranks 33rd in total compensation (and 37th in salary and 19th in benefits) among 39 surveyed cities.

Benefits are almost universally awarded to council members of those cities surveyed with 85 percent providing some kind of benefits package. The types of benefits offered most frequently are health insurance (64 percent), pension benefits (36 percent), and travel/car allowances (33 percent). In terms of the total value of benefits awarded per year, the Metro Council (\$9,600) is only slightly above the median for those surveyed (\$9,300). In recent history, benefits have represented the largest part of Metro Council compensation. Consequently, compensation today is driven by a relatively high vehicle allowance on top of a modest monthly salary and almost no other benefits.

TOTAL COMPENSATION IN EBR RANKS AMONG BOTTOM 25%

Annual compensation packages of council members (2006)



1 Estimate of health insurance, travel/car allowances, mileage reimbursements, pension, dental, life/disability, and phone benefits
 2 Council members are considered full-time public officials
 3 Benefits not reported

Source: BRAC survey of city councils; BRAC analysis

Differences in job demands across cities

While most city councils designate few concrete job responsibilities other than official meetings, national survey data suggest that council members' duties are extensive and quite time-intensive. According to surveys commissioned by the National League of Cities (NLC), council members in "large" cities—those with populations of 200,000 or more—spend 42 hours per week on average on council-related matters. This includes 18 hours per week on "constituent services" such as providing information, handling complaints, and contacting government agencies in response to constituent concerns.

Most cities that provided a specific estimate of hours spent on council related matters in the BRAC survey answered in the range of 15 to 40 hours per week. The BRAC survey of cities indicates that the majority of city council members are expected to spend greater than 25 hours per week on council business, and most council positions are officially considered "part-time" jobs. However, it should also be noted that councils offering the highest level of compensation (Minneapolis and Portland) do indeed consider their council members to be "full-time" public officials.

The importance of staff support

In addition to compensation and job expectations/demands, it is important to consider any staff available to support the work of council members. All else being equal, a relatively high level of council staff support might in part justify lower compensation for members in some cases, given the capacity of council staff to perform administrative and research duties that would otherwise be left to members themselves. However, BRAC survey results suggest that council members with higher staff levels actually receive higher compensation. Also, the number of support staff per council member often increased with the hourly expectations of council members across the surveyed cities, suggesting that more staff is needed by council members in "full-time" roles (i.e., 40 hours per week or more) than those in "part-time" roles.

The BRAC survey indicates wide variation in the level of dedicated council staff support among peer cities, with Metro Council members receiving a below-average level of support compared to their counterparts in other cities. Though the examination of staffing levels in this study was not exhaustive, council members in peer cities have greater staff support on average than Metro Council members (1.6 support FTEs per member in EBR versus 2.4 support FTEs per member in surveyed cities).

Conclusion

Though compensation of the EBR Metro Council is notably below the average of surveyed cities, there is no clear evidence that higher compensation of council members will increase the success of the city's policies and overall economic performance. However, the appropriateness of current compensation in EBR should be considered today, as council members receive 40 percent less in real terms than they did in 1966 for a job that has become significantly more complex. The results of this survey show that high compensation and a high number of council-dedicated staff often correlate with a "full-time" public service commitment. Given the wide range of compensation practices observed across surveyed cities and the lack of a consensus philosophy with regards to city council compensation, BRAC declines to make a specific recommendation on Metro Council compensation at this time.

BRAC will conduct further research on matters of public concern in an effort to improve public governance and to raise the level of public discussion on substantive issues. A related study of the compensation of the Mayor-President and the senior staff of the Mayor-President will follow in 2007. After this additional research is completed, BRAC may recommend appropriate compensation levels for members of the Metro Council, the Mayor-President, and senior staff of the Mayor-President.

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana (PAR) and the Council for A Better Louisiana (CABL) have reviewed and endorsed the methodology for this study. However, this document does not reflect the work or views of either PAR or CABL.