

Local officials' public meals policies bring ethics to table

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MANZANITA — It gives new meaning to pork in the budget.

Some might call it chewing the fat. Others might ask, "Where's the beef?"

The issue is meals — those eaten by public officials and paid for by the public.

Last year, the County Commission picked up the tab for dinners at mealtime meetings with community leaders throughout the county using its public budget. In Pacific City, a meal for 10 or 12 people, including commissioners and Chamber of Commerce members, came to \$314, County Management Analyst Paul Levesque told the *Headlight-Herald*.

That gave some members of the community heartburn.

"It is never ethical to give gifts in any form to members of the business community," wrote John Tenny of Pacific City in a letter to the *Headlight-Herald*. "It is unbelievable that the commissioners would spend taxpayer money to buy themselves and members of the business community expensive dinners while some of those taxpayers suffer."

Pacific City resident Schubert Moore wrote a similar letter to the editor.

"I hardly know where to begin to express my outrage," he wrote. "This is clearly a misuse of tax dollars."

Commissioners, who are paid, elected officials, work long hours. County Commissioner Mark Labhart said he usually works six days a week, with several night meetings each week. And he said commissioners rarely, if ever, work a 40-hour week.

But in the face of public outrage at the practice of using the public budget to pay for meals, the commission discontinued the practice.

"It's off the table," Labhart wrote in an e-mail to city officials, the *Headlight-Herald* reported.

When reached by phone last week, Labhart said he immediately discontinued the practice after learning that at least some residents did not approve.

The same issue has surfaced in the Neah-Kah-Nie School District this year, with the district using its public budget to buy meals for mealtime work sessions. The meals, which fed about 10 people, averaged about \$150.

"I just think \$150 a meal is a little excessive," said school board member Terry Kelly at the February school board meeting.

Other school board members said they appreciated the meals, with many of them going to the meetings that often run late into the evening directly after work.

School board members are not paid; they volunteer their time to govern the school district.

Kelly has worked as a marketing associate at Sysco Corporation, which sells food and supplies to restaurants, for the past four years. He said the price of meals at school board meetings was not only excessive in price, but also in quantity. And while he recognizes that the meals are not extravagant, he said he would like to see the group enjoy more affordable meals.

"It's those little nickel and dime things that start adding up," he said.

It's an issue that transcends Tillamook County. The public often criticizes legislators for accepting lavish meals from lobbyists. Last May, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to make public lobbyists contributions for political campaigns, including gifts or meals provided to lawmakers. And U.S. marshals complained in 2005 that expenses for hotel rooms and meals allotted to traveling government employees are too low,

according to a 2005 *New York Times* article.

In Long Island last year, the issue was water. Water commissioners were offered free Costco memberships, which led to public concern that their tax dollars were floating away.

"We're no experts in fluid dynamics, but it does not take a hydrologist or even an unlicensed plumber to realize that tax money, like water, will disappear if leaks are not plugged or people are not watched every minute," read a Sept. 23 editorial in the *Times*.

And in Scotland, the issue arose when free lunches for councilors were scrapped to save 45,000 pounds a year. Officials were asked to drop money in an "honesty box" to pay for their lunches. But the box did not bring out honesty in some of the officials, often coming up short.

"It's pretty common to compensate people for a meal," said Ryan Friedrichs of the Center for Civic Participation. "As long as it's transparent and agreed to ahead of time, there is usually no controversy."

The issue, he said, is usually a matter of disclosure and transparency.

But Kelly said he would be embarrassed to ask the public to feed him, preferring instead to pay for his own meals.

The issue, Friedrichs continued, may be a symptom of a larger disease.

"There is a very distrustful feeling toward legislators," he said. "Maybe this is one of the things that's reflecting it."

A 2004 study by the Pew Research Center pointed to those feelings, showing that 69 percent of those polled thought the government was usually inefficient and wasteful.

So, meals may be an issue that simmers for some time.

"We've got so many important issues out there," Labhart said, expressing frustration that "this is still on the table."