County OK's new contract for sheriff's deputies

By Pat Murphy
Staff Writer

They don't have precise figures, or even good estimates.

But Oakland County commissioners are confident the higher salaries and increased pension benefits approved for sheriff's deputies will be balanced out by "trade offs," or concessions.

During their regular meeting Thursday, commissioners approved a new contract that will increase the base pay for deputies with five or more years of experience to $41,803 over three years.

Deputies had been working without a contract since the old one expired Dec. 31, 1991, when the base pay for experienced deputies was $37,844.

The 513 employees covered by the contract received increases of 4.5 percent for 1992 and 3 percent for 1993 and 1994. The same increases were given to other county employees.

The provision that raised eyebrows and triggered questions, however, was a change in how retirement benefits are computed.

Currently pension benefits, which deputies can collect at age 50 with a minimum of 25 years, are computed on the average earnings for the employees five best consecutive years. The monthly pension is that figure, multiplied by two for each year of service.

Earnings for the five best consecutive years include base pay, longevity and overtime.

Commissioners agreed to boost the multiplier to 2.1 percent immediately and 2.2 percent beginning next year.

As a trade off, however, overtime pay will not be used to compute the annual earnings for those hired after the contract takes effect. Furthermore, deputies this months will begin contributing 1.95 toward the retirement fund.

Changes in computing retirement benefits bothered some commissioners, particularly since they had been critical of the amount of overtime expended in the sheriff's department each year.

Also bothersome to some commissioners was the lack of data about how changing the retirement formula would affect the county.

Commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick said those cost estimates are important because of previous personnel practices. "What we give one group of employees, we usually end up giving to others."

Oakland is the county's fourth largest employer with about 3,500 full-time employees.

Commissioner Donald W. Jensen, R-Birmingham, said the deputy's contract is "troublesome," particularly changing retirement provisions. "I'm afraid of the precedent we might be setting. I voted for the new contract because the alternative would probably be worse. Had we not approved the contract, it would have gone to arbitration."

Some commissioners voted for the new contract because of assurances from officials like Vincent Luzi. They had not seen an actuary's assessment, they said. But based on their computations, retirement costs under the new contract would not be excessive.

Furthermore, said Luzi, it's not necessarily true that benefits given to one group of employees — such as the deputies — are traditionally granted to others.

Commissioner Lawrence A. Obrecht, R-Lake Orion, had mixed feelings. Commissioners should have cost projections before voting on any employee contract, he said. "But I'm going to vote for it."

Commissioner Marilynn E. Gosling, R-Bloomfield Hills, joined with Obrecht in demanding that cost projections be made available. She said she is confident, however, concessions from deputies will likely offset any additional cost to the county.

Lighthouse elects officers

Lighthouse of Oakland County — which provides food, clothing, medical and other assistance to north Oakland County residents in need — has elected officers to serve on its board of directors for the upcoming term.

Re-elected president was Barbara Miller, a program and evaluation analyst at the Oakland County Health Department. She also serves on the board of the United Way of Oakland County.

Re-elected vice president was Michael Hohauser, an attorney with Googasian, Hopkins, Rogers, Hohauser & Forhan.

Elected treasurer was John Dickson, a partner at the accounting firm of Moceri, Dickson & Associates.

Elected secretary was Norma Keller, a Realtor at Ralph Manuel Realtors and a member of the Birmingham-Bloomfield Board of Realtors.

In addition, Thomas Carbin and Marc Cooper have joined the board of directors.

Carbin is the human resources manager of Comerica Bank, serves on the steering committee of Leadership Oakland, and is a member of the Auburn Hills Chamber of Commerce.

Cooper is the owner of The Impressive Type printing company in Waterford.

Lighthouse of Oakland County is a member agency of United Way of Oakland County.

Rounding up the business round table

By Pat Murphy
Staff Writer

Local businesses are receptive to the idea of an advisory group to help improve Oakland County's business climate, according to County Executive L. Brooks Patterson.

"I've been inundated with companies offering their services," Patterson said Friday while talking about his proposed business roundtable.

The roundtable was one of the campaign promises Patterson made last fall in his race against Democrat Elizabeth "Betty" Howe.

"We're within four or six weeks of getting the roundtable off the ground," Patterson said. "We've had volunteers from large, medium and small businesses, and two executives have agreed to be co-chairmen. We'll announce their names in a few weeks."

The roundtable could hold its first meeting as early as mid-May, the executive said. It could be sooner, except he wants a full agenda — as well as an organization — in place before holding any meetings.

The goal of the roundtable, Patterson reiterated, is to determine which factors are conducive and which are detrimental to the business climate. "We want to talk with businesses that recently moved to Oakland County and find out why they decided to locate here.

"If Oakland is doing something right, we want to find out," he said. "We want to continue doing it. If possible, we want to expand it."

Conversely, the executive said, county officials want to learn what policies, if any, make doing business in Oakland cumbersome or difficult . . . and then change those policies.

As envisioned by Patterson, the roundtable will have as many as 125 companies represented.

The county's economic development department is currently conducting a survey, he said. "We're contacting as many businesses as possible to learn what they like, and what they don't like."