

# New wage study fuels union's fire

## Results reflect wide parity in county salaries

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SANTA CRUZ — The county's frontline workers earn almost 8 percent less, on average, than those in nearby counties, but still pay the most for health care, according to a new study.

The study, co-sponsored by the Service Employees International Union and the county, strengthens the union's position as it enters its last and most contentious leg of contract negotiations — salary packages. The union's contract expires Sept. 13.

Looking at 53 positions, the county compared wages with those in eight surrounding counties. Local workers earned 7.5 percent less than others, with some positions as much as 24 percent behind. Nearly half of the positions were more than 10 percent behind the market average. Retirement packages were the only form of compensation in which county workers were even with others.

SEIU Local 415 includes about 1,800 health, clerical and blue-collar county workers. They were compared with workers in Marin, Monterey, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano and Sonoma counties.

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Please see **WAGE STUDY** on **BACK PAGE**

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## Wage study

Continued from Page A1

January, the county had 283 vacant positions, according to the most recent figures available. Many of those were cut during budget hearings.

But even the SEIU was shocked by how far behind the market Santa Cruz County is when it comes to health benefits.

The county pays \$4,480, on average, into employee health plans. But nearby counties pay \$6,040 to \$8,700, even though the cost of living in some of those counties is much lower.

"It's like double trouble. Not only are we below average on wages ... but our take-home is less," said Cliff Tillman, SEIU executive director. "In order for (the county) to be just, they're going to have to look at both the benefits and wages they're offering workers."

The county would not only have to raise its current rate but eat premium hikes to improve things. The county's health insurance provider — the California Public Employee Retirement System — is raising premiums as much as 23 percent in January.

The county and SEIU sponsored the salary study in hopes of avoiding the figure feuds of previous years. Union representatives have been encouraged so far by the county's cooperation and hope it lasts.

But the union is also prepared to do what it has to achieve parity. Since its current contract was signed three years ago, county supervisors have approved generous raises for upper-level management, the Sheriff's Office, the District Attorney's Office and themselves. Top administrators got raises as high as 8 percent, and supervisors' pay went up nearly 30 percent, to \$83,000.

The SEIU expects comparable hikes. And it's armed with a comfortable strike fund if it doesn't get it.

But county supervisors say parity is a priority for them as well.

"Our intent is to do everything possible to move toward parity, using these numbers as a guide," said supervisor Jeff Almquist.

"The study shows we have a very serious problem," supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt said. "I think it's imperative we come up with a plan that demonstrates our commitment to getting (to parity) in a reasonable period of time."

But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy.

"I think (negotiations) will be difficult," Almquist said. "I think the union thinks there's more money available than there is."

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