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Raises expected for Douglas County union workers

The board preferred to keep salaries the same but decided a freeze was unrealistic.

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Despite a looming budget shortfall, the Douglas County Board is expected to grant raises totaling 7 percent for about 105 union workers when it votes Tuesday on three-year contracts.

The contracts cover accountants, clerks, records technicians and real estate recorders for 2011 through 2013. The employees work in the County Clerk, Register of Deeds, General Assistance and Correctional Center Offices.

The union groups have worked under expired contracts for more than a year.

Deputy County Administrator Patrick Bloomingdale said the raises would total about \$275,000 in additional compensation over the three-year period.

Bloomingdale, who negotiated for the administration, said workers covered by the bargaining units would not receive longevity pay. Maximum pension benefits will be reduced for future employees. Current employees,

however, would not be affected by the new pension limitations.

"I am happy and satisfied with how it came out," Bloomingdale said Friday. "They asked for higher amounts than what they negotiated."

Workers would get a 2 percent retroactive raise for 2011, another 2 percent raise this year and a 3 percent raise in 2013.

A small percentage of employees also are eligible for another annual raise, called a salary-step increase, which typically is at least 2 percent, board member

Mike Boyle said. After seven or eight years on the job, union employees generally no longer receive step increases.

Bloomingdale said it was unrealistic to force the unions to accept a wage freeze.

He said they would have appealed to the Nebraska Commission of Industrial Relations, the board that handles labor disputes between public employees and their government employers.

Had the dispute gone to the CIR, the county probably would

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have had to give greater raises than it negotiated, Bloomingdale said.

"This is the best we could do under the circumstances," he said.

Marc Kraft, chairman of the County Board, said he expects the board to approve the contracts Tuesday.

He said he would have preferred no raises, given the current state of the U.S. economy and the need to cut costs in county government.

"Because of the threat of the

CIR, that makes our ability to negotiate rather difficult," Kraft said.

Kraft said he still hopes the County Board can avoid a property tax rate increase when it votes on a new budget this summer, but that is not a sure thing.

In November, the board voted 3-3 on a nonbinding resolution offered by P.J. Morgan that called for no increase in the property tax rate in the 2012-13 fiscal budget. Kraft abstained from voting.

Also in November, the board voted to allocate more than \$200,000 for salary increases for about 300 managers and non-union workers, including County Administrator Kathleen Kelley. Her salary rose about \$1,450 to approximately \$147,500.

The board faces pressure this spring from other officeholders who want raises for their non-union employees.

Douglas County Attorney Don Kleine recently asked the board to set aside between \$200,000 and

\$300,000 to increase the salaries of his lesser-paid deputy attorneys by \$5,000 to \$10,000 each. The board hasn't yet voted on a proposal.

Also at Tuesday's meeting, Public Defender Tom Riley is expected to make a case for increasing the compensation for some of his deputy public defenders.

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