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Bell, Calif., mayor apologizes for 'indefensible' city salaries

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Associated Press

BELL, Calif. — Under pressure from outraged residents and facing a probe by the California attorney general, the beleaguered City Council of this small blue-collar city voted Monday to slash its salaries by 90 percent, and two members said they will not seek re-election when their terms are up.

The council voted unanimously to set every member's salary at what Councilman Lorenzo Velez is paid — about \$8,000 a year.

The other four council members have been making about \$100,000 a year for their part-time service on the City Council of this largely working-class city of about 40,000 residents southeast of Los Angeles. About 17 percent of Bell's residents live in poverty.

The move came days after a scandal erupted over the pay of council members and other city officials. The city manager, who made nearly \$800,000, has already resigned. And Attorney General Jerry Brown on Monday revealed he had subpoenaed hundreds of city records.

Mayor Oscar Hernandez said he would take no salary for the rest of his term and apologized for the excessive pay given to top officials, an about-face after he last week defended salaries of the city manager and other staff.

"My priority has been to make Bell a city its residents can be proud to call home," Hernandez said in a statement. "I apologize that the council's past decisions with regard to the indefensible administrative salaries have failed to meet that test."

Hernandez and Councilman George Mirabal said they would not seek re-election when their terms are up.

About 275 residents assembled ahead of the meeting, which had been moved to a community center to accommodate the crowd.

The five City Council members, looking grim-faced, entered the center to an earsplitting chorus of boos and shouts in Spanish of "Get out."

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When one person shouted that Velez, the sole member not drawing a huge salary, was the only decent member of the council, the crowd broke into applause.

Bell's city manager, police chief and assistant city manager all resigned last week after it was revealed they were making salaries totaling \$1.6 million a year.

The six-figure salaries at City Hall have prompted a backlash from the community and investigations by the California attorney general and county district attorney.

The salaries exploded into public view after a Los Angeles Times investigation, based on California Public Records Act requests, showed the city payroll was bloated with six-figure salaries:

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