

# Mendocino Co. retirement will keep Bay Area inflation model

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Concerned current and former Mendocino County employees were present Wednesday morning as the employees' retirement association board opted to stick with a 2.5 percent cost of living adjustment for pensions, based on a Bay Area inflation model.

Previously, board member and 4th District Supervisor Dan Gjerde questioned whether or not using a Bay Area inflation adjustment for an expensive living area like San Francisco was an accurate reflection of Mendocino County's economy. Because of that, a "West Region" Consumer Price Index was proposed for consideration, which bases its inflation rate on states like Alaska, Arizona and Montana, for example.

Based on numbers, a change from the Bay Area CPI to the West Region CPI could have resulted in a decrease of retirement inflation dollars for employees, and would have less financial impact on county retirement in the future.

Mendocino County has historically used the Bay Area CPI for employee retirement-eligible cost of living adjustment since 1971, county documents state.

"Again, these are urbanized areas," Gjerde said of the Bay Area CPI-U. "Silicon Valley and San Francisco barely felt the recession that we did in Mendocino County. To compare ourselves to them is really making a poor choice. I don't know why they picked it in 1971, and I won't support it in 2015."

Gjerde added that Mendocino County doesn't have the Silicon Valley or San Francisco market driving the economy.

Data from the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics states that the West Region CPI-U recorded in December for the previous 12 months was 1.3 percent, while the annual San Francisco area CPI-U recorded in December was 2.7 percent. However, the Labor Department determined the latest January CPI-U for the western region to be 0.7 percent.

Prior to voting, James Wilbanks, county retirement administrator, suggested the board "use the lens on which measure gives the best rate of inflation for Mendocino County."

"I think it's healthy for the board to have a discussion on this topic," Wilbanks said. "Let's make a decision and stick with it going forward."

Some of the former and current employees in attendance spoke out in fear of losing retirement funding if the board were to consider an alternative cost of living adjustment, or COLA. Employees also believed a Bay Area evaluation was appropriate to consider the high cost of living for a California coastal community like Mendocino County.

However, an SEIU union representative present said no change could have been made at the Wednesday meeting anyway citing, "two closed contracts were already in place" between the union and county.

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