

# Virtual 2021-23 state employee contract talks provide opportunity for more transparency

By JASON MERCIER | BLOG | May 7, 2020

In the coming month, Governor Inslee will begin negotiating the 2021-23 state employee contracts. The deal he reaches with the government employee unions will not be subject to legislative change, other than an up or down vote. The compensation terms will need to be deemed “financially feasible” by the Office of Financial Management (OFM) in order to be included in the Governor’s 2021-23 state budget proposal. Due to the current social distancing requirements, the contract talks will be conducted virtually. This provides the opportunity to help provide important transparency on these normally closed-door discussions.

According to OFM:

“There had been some bargaining dates originally set for April and May, but most of those have been postponed due to the COVID crisis. Those meetings will likely be rescheduled for June and conducted virtually. (A few of the smaller tables have already had initial virtual sessions.)

As you can imagine, due to the COVID crisis, our labor relations teams are having to figure out and arrange new meeting processes. All parties are also taking some time to assess the state’s changing economic outlook.”

One of the arguments that has been made against providing more transparency on these highly critical budget talks, is the claim that by having the public or press in the room it would make the discussions too difficult to conduct. With the talks being conducted virtually, however, TWV could be authorized to broadcast the talks without adding outside parties to the room. This would provide important transparency on the tradeoffs being considered as we enter the first base budget written reflecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a minimum, during these critical contract budget talks the Governor and government employee unions should adopt an openness process like the one used by the City of Costa Mesa in California to keep the public informed. The policy used there is called COIN (Civic Openness in Negotiations).

Under the COIN process, all of the contract proposals and documents that are to be discussed in closed-door secret negotiations are made publicly available before and after the meetings, with fiscal analysis provided showing the potential costs. While not full-fledged open meetings, providing access to all of the documents before the meetings better informs the public about the promises and tradeoffs being proposed with their tax dollars before an agreement is reached.

Contract transparency is currently the norm in many states across the country (including our neighbors in Idaho and Oregon). Some states open the entire negotiation process to the public, while others include an exemption when government officials are strategizing among themselves. Once public officials meet with union negotiators, however, the public is allowed to be informed and monitor the process.

Not only is contract transparency good policy, it is strongly supported by the public. Last November, nearly 80% of Spokane voters approved a city charter amendment requiring collective bargaining negotiations in the city be open to public observation.

Government employment contracts should not be negotiated in secret. The public provides the money for these agreements. Taxpayers should be allowed to follow the process and hold government officials accountable for the spending decisions they make on our behalf. Government employees should also be able to see firsthand what offers and counteroffers are being made by union executives in their name. A policy of open public meetings would identify whether one side or the other is being unreasonable and would quickly reveal who, if anyone, is acting in bad faith.

With the 2021-23 state employee contract talks being conducted virtually, now is the time and opportunity to provide important transparency on these critical fiscal decisions that will help frame post COVID-19 state spending.