

Travel tally

City expense budgets range from frugal to generous

By Tania Chatila and Jennifer McLain, Staff Writers

Local cities expect to spend nearly a half-million dollars this year to send officials to conferences across the country.

Taxpayer money covers nearly all the costs associated with these trips, including air fare, hotel stays and meals.

But where these elected officials go, what they spend and how often they travel differs from city to city.

A review of travel expenses for council members in 17 cities show some municipalities budget as little as \$5,000 for travel and have strict policies that curb expenses. Other cities, however, give their councils up to \$60,000 a year - split equally among members - to cover costs like \$75 seafood plates, stays at posh hotels and beers ordered at pool-side bars.

"We've never needed (limits)," La Puente Councilman Louie Lujan said. "All of our council members have always acted professionally, always submitted receipts. We've never had any issues."

La Puente, which has 43,000 residents, and South El Monte, with 22,500 residents, have the largest budgets of all 17 cities, at \$60,000 a year each.

South El Monte did not respond timely to a public records request made in July. Late Friday, the city released some documents that are being

reviewed.

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South El Monte Councilman Louie Agui aga said their expense budget is justified because of the amount of commercial development occurring in the city.

"Because of the conferences we go to," Agui aga said, "we are getting the money we deserve, and it has paid off."

Other cities with double, triple or even five times the number of residents have smaller budgets.

But Lujan said those numbers alone are difficult to compare.

"For each council in their respective cities, of course they vote on what works for them," Lujan said. "This works for us."

West Covina, Pasadena and El Monte all have populations of more than 100,000. West Covina's budget is \$39,000, El Monte's is \$30,000 and Pasadena's is \$27,000. Whittier, with a population

of 83,700, budgets \$17,200 for meetings and travel.

"Considering we're not financially strapped ... we're pretty frugal," Whittier City Controller Rod Hill said. "It's not like they are just going to travel for the heck of it."

La Verne had the lowest travel budget reviewed with a total of \$5,000 a year. Last year, council members spent \$3,000 more than what was budgeted, but that number is still lower than all other cities.

"Some people would say that is exorbitantly cheap," said La Verne City Manager Martin Lomeli. "We have a city council who gets out to a lot of regional activities, but they just don't tend to travel a lot."

Not all cities follow that trend.

While most local council members travel to between three to five conferences a year, Rosemead Councilman John Nu ez attended 22 conferences in two years.

"The way I see it is that I have a unique opportunity to attend conferences," he said. "I don't have small kids, I don't

have a 60-hour job. I'm just trying to be a better city councilman."

The total cost of Nu ez's trips could not be calculated due to the way Rosemead files expenses.

Nu ez said the conferences allow him to network and learn about complex issues such as redevelopment.

"Sure, I could read a book about some of these things," he said. "But that would take me seven years."

These conferences are "extremely valuable," said Eva Spiegel, spokeswoman for the League of California Cities.

"They have an opportunity to learn from experts, learn new ideas, hear from legislators, hear what is happening in the Capitol, and have the opportunity to network," Spiegel said. "That is very important because they aren't able to do that just staying in their cities."

But attending conferences does not always come with a high price tag, according to officials.

Baldwin Park, Diamond Bar, West Covina, El Monte and Industry are a few of the cities that have daily meal limit.

"In some instances, obviously you look and see there are those politicians that abuse the system," Baldwin Park Mayor Manuel Lozano said. "Personally, I think it's good for us to have this system in place. It not only monitors but reminds you this is public money."

Meal caps range from about \$50 to \$100 a day in the municipalities that have them.

Some policies allow for a slightly larger allowance in what are considered "high-cost cities."

"The meal limits establish a cost associated with those expenses and cap those costs at which the city will reimburse," Diamond Bar City Manager James DeStefano said.

In most cities, if council members go over their limit, they must pay for it. With these caps, municipalities take into consideration that food is often served free of charge to members attending conferences.

In West Covina, Councilman Mike Touhey was denied reimbursement for a \$21 breakfast and a \$23 lunch while at a conference in Monterey last year. The reason: those meals were "included in seminar itinerary," records show.

But such policies are not always followed.

While it has a \$65-a-day limit for food, Rosemead paid for a \$243.29 bill from Les Artise Steakhouse that was found on the invoice of Councilman John Nu ez's bill while he stayed at the Paris hotel in Las Vegas in 2006.

Officials could not explain the expense.

"I think you'd go on what's sensible and reasonable," said Martin Saiz, a professor of political science at Cal State Northridge. "Certainly steak and lobster every night is a little excessive."

While at a conference in Las Vegas in May, a group of La Puente officials - including Lujan, Mayor Lou Perez, Councilwoman Renee Chavez, City Manager Carol Cowley and Assistant City Manager Gregg Yamachika - used about \$700 of taxpayer money for dinner at Ceasars Palace.

Some of the meals purchased included a \$46 lamb chop plate, a \$45 lobster plate and a \$42 prime rib plate, receipts show.

"I had never been to Vegas before," Cowley said. "It was my first time so I had no clue of what restaurants were good ... I tried to look for restaurants with medium range so that we didn't go overboard and then I made the reservation at Nero's."

Cowley said she was floored by the menu prices and had not expected to pay that much.

La Puente has no meal limits. Lujan said they are too restrictive, considering council members are adults and should be trusted to use public funds accordingly.

If La Puente council members choose, they can spend \$70 on organic greens, steak, sorbet and iced tea for dinner, as Mayor Perez did while at a conference in Indian Wells last year, receipts show.

Earlier that day, while visiting the Hadley Fruit Orchard in Cabazon, he spent an additional \$20 on a hot dog, a shake, one pound of peaches and 12 ounces of apricots, records show.

Lujan said he purposely books his hotels on discount travel sites like priceline.com so that he can spend a little extra on entrees like ahi tuna, salmon, vegetarian pizza and red snapper, as seen in his receipts.

He encourages council members in all cities to take advantage of every penny of their expense budgets.

"I know some council members (in general) that don't use their full budget for fear of scrutiny," Lujan said. "I wish they would just get over it."

tania.chatila@sgvn.com

jennifer.melvin@sgvn.com