



- [Home](#)

Reader Rebuttal (Will Kempton): Public employees

By WILL KEMPTON

06/03/2011 10:34 AM

In recent months, the Register's Watchdog column has devoted substantial space to the salaries and benefits that government workers receive. Several stories have focused on the Orange County Transportation Authority, including one on April 29 that detailed my compensation package and compared it with other executives around the state.

Compensation and pension reform issues certainly merit public discourse, but too often, the focus shifts to an unwarranted judgment – and often an all-out assault – on thousands of public employees who have a vital impact on our economy and quality of life.

My career as a transportation professional has spanned 38 years, and for 27 of those years, I have been very proud to call myself a government employee. Nearly two years ago, I was hired as CEO of the OCTA. I am honored and privileged to serve the people of Orange County. I am surrounded on a daily basis by 1,600 other OCTA employees who feel very much the same way.

Like private sector businesses, our agency has been hit hard by the worst financial crisis this nation has seen since the Great Depression. All too frequently, I have been forced to present to our board of directors very unpleasant options to ensure the agency's effective operation and long-term sustainability. OCTA has resized and reorganized its workforce to match what our residents and voters expect. This government organization will not spend any more tax dollars than it receives.

However, operating with a business mindset carries with it consequences. Unfortunately, in the last two years, OCTA coach operators, mechanics and administrative employees have joined the staggering number of Americans who are unemployed. Administrative employees are entering their third year with no raises, and we are grappling with rising healthcare expenses that potentially will

cost employees more – the same issues faced by the private sector.

In the last year, we have worked cooperatively with our labor unions representing our coach operators, mechanics and maintenance employees to negotiate three-year contracts that will consider compensation adjustments only in the third year and only if the economy improves significantly.

Our employees, like those in the private sector, have sacrificed. They should be applauded because each of them continues to provide excellent public service.

The faces of these employees are too often forgotten in the frenzy to feed the beast that is the never-ending news cycle. In the hunt for more viewers, listeners, readers and clickers, it's easy to incite anger by ranking top-paid government employees.

I am a strong advocate of transparent, open government and have no problem sharing what any one of us at OCTA earns. Our agency was among the first in the state to post online compensation information, which can be viewed here: www.octa.net/righttoknow.

OCTA operates and funds a bus system that served 51 million riders last year and finances and plans Orange County's Metrolink rail operation, utilized by 4 million people annually. We develop and pay for freeway improvements, administer the county's Measure M half-cent sales tax program, provide funding for local street improvements, oversee taxicab permitting, run the Freeway Service Patrol tow trucks and operate the 91 Express Lanes. This agency has consistently delivered traffic relief despite a growing population.

Through these services, OCTA is an economic engine for Orange County businesses. In 2010, projects totaling more than \$525 million went into construction, resulting in thousands of local well-paying private-sector jobs in construction, not to mention engineering and design. This benefit to local business is in accordance with OCTA's policy to contract out as much engineering and professional services work as possible to private-sector firms.

And overseeing these projects and services are OCTA employees, a collection of dedicated, honest and highly skilled individuals. We are engineers, contractors, financial planners, contract administrators, mechanics, coach operators, communications and information technology professionals.

We work every day to make this county better for our residents, businesses and visitors and ensure it remains a thriving place for our children and grandchildren.

We are a government agency that delivers on its promises on schedule and within budget. This can be seen in the completion of the Measure M program and the trust that 70 percent of voters placed in OCTA by renewing the half-cent sales tax for 30 more years. We are government that works.

I welcome you to look at the list of what we earn and hope that when you do, you remember that we are your friends and your neighbors. We coach your Little League teams, volunteer for the Red Cross and raise money to fight Alzheimer's. Your tax dollars are our tax dollars, too. We eat out in San Clemente, exercise at the gym in Orange, buy cars in Tustin and send our children to Cal State Fullerton.

All of us are concerned about the state of our economy. But that angst should not be taken out on public employees. I ask that you join me in taking pride in the demonstrated commitment and the hard work performed day in and day out by the men and women at OCTA and other public employees like us throughout the state.

[About Us](#)

[Mobile Apps](#)

[Follow @OCRmobile](#)

[Text Alerts](#)

[E-mail customer service](#)

[Regular Site](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Advertise](#)

© 2011 Orange County Register Communications