



High Speed Chase, Police Wage Shopping



REVISION: *Manager Insights #3 got the attention of Grand County which had reported the Sheriff's budget as 39% percentage of the General Fund. After seeing how this was out of proportion to other counties, their team revised, excluding emergency management, building inspection and coroner as well as some capital items. Also erroneously included in the first number was the Jail. These revise their number to 18%. Issue 3 has revised this in the posted [revision here](#).*

The Manager Insights Series: As Executive Director, I interviewed each NWCCOG municipal and county manager during the first quarter of 2023 and asked each a series of

questions on housing, sustainability, marketing, policing among other topics.

The insights from their expanded thoughts across the exercise will be shared out in a variety of ways including this special series of From the Director's Desk which we will issue weekly for the next month or so. This is Issue 3 of the series, you can read past [issues here](#).

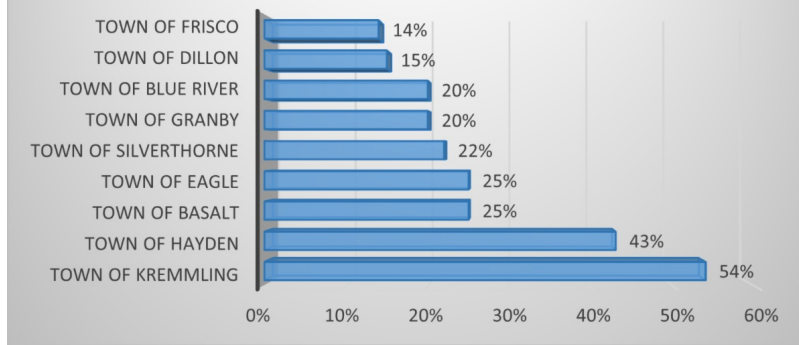
Jon Stavney
Executive Director - NWCCOG
JStavney@nwccog.org

Law enforcement is absorbing a large portion of general fund budgets across the region. With liability costs poised to increase next year and the lack of officers causing fierce wage competition, it appears that police and sheriff budgets will increasingly limit the resources local governments retain to address other strategic priorities.

The effect is most apparent in the smaller towns trying to maintain a local police force a bit less among resort towns and towns that contract for law enforcement services. For places like Blue River, Kremmling half the total staff work in the police department. I asked public managers across the region a question about the cost of insuring law enforcement – has it yet hit the bottom lines?

There are many factors at play with the cost of policing. Colorado set the national standard with SB - 217 placing \$25,000 of financial liability on individual officers in June of 2020, which some departments have said would decimate their ranks. [CPR news](#) reported in 2021 that officers were increasingly being held accountable for

Law Enforcement as % of GF - Med. Size Towns w/Police



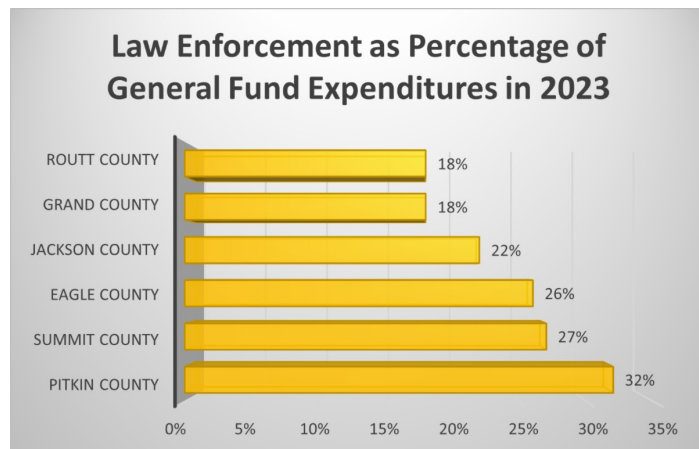
misconduct. NWCCOG published a report on the [impacts of SB-217](#) in 2020 which discussed the cost of body cameras, and management of those systems to smaller police departments.

Given that insurance was a minor issue as of 2023 budgets, what are we to make of the upward trend of the cost of policing in general in places like Frisco which has nearly doubled the police budget in the past 5 years, now at

\$2.3M? Their law enforcement budget is only 13.7% of the general fund budget, about the same percentage as Dillon, across the lake. In some mid-sized towns, like Eagle and Basalt, those figures are close to 25% of the General Fund budget that is dedicated to policing. Counties range from Routt and Grand at 18% up to Pitkin County at 32%. It should be noted that these tables and percentage estimates exclude 911 call center fees, court and other emergency services even if provided by the local government mentioned. This NWCCOG project didn't collect year-to-year data on police department expenditure increases, it only asked what percentage of the GF is dedicated to police in 2023.

So as to not appear to be picking on law enforcement as a profession, I do observe less job-shopping among administrative staff and public works. There is considerable "mobility" among planners, IT workers, bus drivers and most notably, police officers and sheriff's deputies. My theory on the planners is that few other staffers or citizens appreciate how grinding that role is, and that there are so few trained planners for so many open jobs that it doesn't take much dissatisfaction with a council, a manager or interactions with angry citizens or pushy developers for a planner to start looking at job postings. At NWCCOG with our middle mile network, Project THOR, we work with 11 different entities, only one of which has the same IT director from when we started 5 years ago. There has been a carousel of planners rotating through some Eagle and Summit County entities.

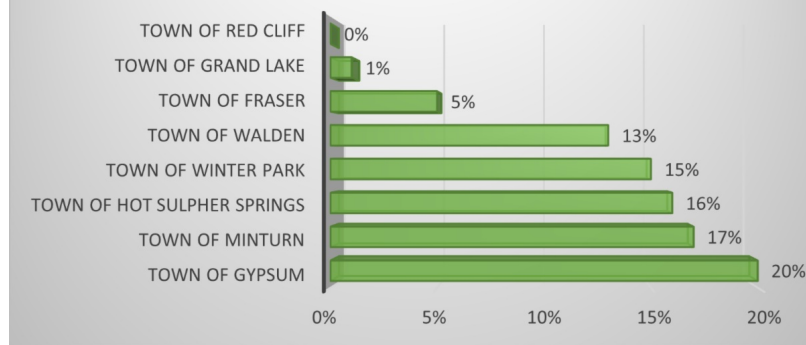
It may be that culture and workplace create stronger teams and produce more institutional loyalty in some public departments than others, like a Clerk or treasurer's office, or Public Works. Judging from seven seasons of Parks and Recreation series, it would appear Recreation also qualifies as a more loyalty-based department, at least among non-seasonal employees. Widely referenced in recent years, the fraternity of law enforcement, which provide mutual aid day-to-day to each other may be stronger between colleagues than their connection to their communities. This is not a judgement, just an observation. For some reason those with badges seem to be the quickest to jump the fence for a couple dollars more. As a result, compensation for law enforcement seems to drive the leading edge for wage range analysis for many organizations.



A case in point for the cascading impact of increased wages are the three local government entities in the law enforcement business in Routt County. Chasing wages in that market has impacted the Town of Hayden most where Town Manager Mathew Mendisco notes that it takes 43% of the General Fund to cover the cost of policing there. This percentage is the second highest in the region among municipalities, only to Kremmling where policing consumes over 54% of the General Fund as reported by Manager Ashley Macdonald. She laments how the cost of law enforcement is preventing the many other priorities expressed by the Town Board from being addressed. To anyone who has sat in a Manager's chair or on a Town Board, sorting through the varied priorities and needs of a town during budget season, the increasing cost of law enforcement should sound an alarm—the police department is crippling the town's ability to achieve other strategic priorities.

Some small towns, like Grand Lake at 1% or Walden at 12.7% of the cost of General Fund goes to the contract with the local

Law Enforcement as % of GF - Contracted Munis



sheriff's office, while for Minturn that contract with the County Sheriff's office have been able to keep costs down to 17% of the GF similarly to Hot Sulphur Springs which recently contracted with Grand County Sheriff at 16% of their General Fund. In Gypsum that number for contracting is 20%. Others like Red Cliff and until recently HSS are so small they have mostly escaped the demand for a contract to pay the Sheriff. That is changing in HSS, one of the

three towns in NWCCOG region that cannot afford a town administrator. The Town of Gypsum is a mid-sized town that has contracted with the Eagle County Sheriff for years is able to keep law enforcement costs to 20% of the General Fund while comparable towns like Eagle and Basalt each pay 25% for policing services in 2023. As a cost containment strategy, contracting can be an excellent solution. It does have tradeoffs.

Another solution for Fraser and Winter Park which pay respectively 5% and 15% of their General Funds toward that is to "share" law enforcement services. Technically, Fraser contracts with Winter Park. Note that in all cases, the cost of running a 911 call center, a jail or other emergency services has been excluded from these figures which would bring these percentages even higher.

Routt County Manager Jay Harrington a few miles up the road from Hayden, and 60 miles over the hill from Kremmling notes that the Sheriff's Office as the county's "most expensive department." He proudly points out that at \$9 million per year, and 18% of their General Fund overall costs—the sheriff is now fully staffed. This is unusual across the region, and a major accomplishment that came with real costs. He credits the BOCC (Commissioners) with recently approving over 10% of the 2022 general fund budget towards wage increases, and supporting a complete overhaul of the county benefits from accelerating vacation accrual, shorter pay periods, and improved health benefits. That overhaul may be why Harrington cites "changing workplace" as the top internal challenge that he and his managers face.

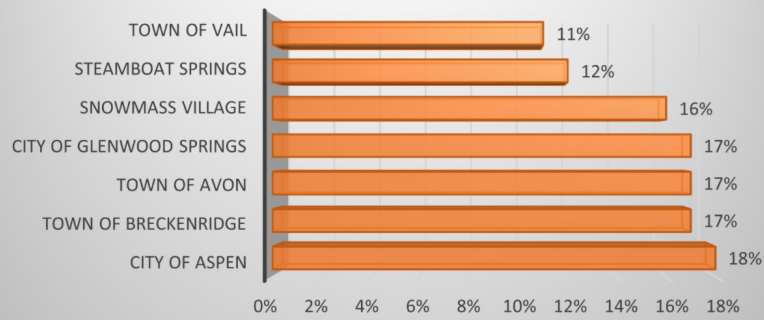
The choice for many other counties and towns is to respond, or get left behind in the employee competition. Harrington is clear that Routt was not just chasing wages but overhauling all aspects of HR and culture. It is making a difference, and not just for the County as an organization. Routt is the second most isolated of NWCCOG counties -- 60 to 90 miles "from anywhere." The community has a reputation for solving their own problems. Unlike some other regions, it doesn't have a traditional "down valley" to shunt issues like most of the other resort communities, although Hayden and Craig may beg to differ on that point. Steamboat is beyond the commuting range of most other places other than the City of Craig which is even from 42 miles away on a two-lane highway, according to Harrington is feeling the orbit of increased wages by Routt County and the City of Steamboat.

Several state patrol officers have come to work for Routt County this past year. Harrington is concerned that the State as a larger, less nimble government may not be keeping up with local governments in adapting to "the changing workplace" he cites as the top internal challenge. He can go down the hall for evidence. The current Sheriff of Routt County was recently elected to that job in which wages are not decided by the Board of County Commissioners. The BOCC's itself has wages set by the legislature according to a tiered structure of counties by a formula that takes into account mostly population. Larger counties have higher pay for elected leaders. When the Routt County Sheriff moved from his Undersheriff job, he absorbed a 23% pay cut. In moving from a County pay scale to a State pay scale, the Sheriff gave up ¼ of his wages from one year to the next. Routt and Summit Counties are appealing to the legislature to change their Tier to 1A to improve this inequity. It just isn't realistic for a legislature to set wages in this dynamic work environment. Along with Manager Harrington, I too wonder who will work for the state in these remote areas with such wage imbalances.

A couple blocks from the county building at the City of Steamboat Springs, City Manager Gary Suiter notes that since January of 2022, "we have had average salary increases of about 20%." Steamboat had a different challenge in bringing a town that often had over 30,000 people visiting some weeks and only "two cops on duty," to an appropriate level

of staffing to meet the City's risks—as a resort town that still has a heart of a cow town. It was time for a new policing plan including a “more robust command structure” according to Suiter. It wasn't just keeping up with Routt that led the city to review all aspects of its own law enforcement department. After those changes, with a strong resort sales tax income, Steamboat still covers the cost of law enforcement with about 12% of the General Fund. This is about average for resort communities which utilize the police for event management, visitor “education” and code enforcement as much as meat-and-potatoes police work. Vail is at 11%, Winter Park 15%, Breckenridge at 17%, and Aspen at 18% of their law enforcement costs as a percentage of the General Fund expenditures.

Law Enforcement as % of GF - Resort Towns



Down the road from Steamboat in Hayden those overhauls to HR policy at Routt County and to the force in the City of Steamboat Springs have a magnified effect. There, Town Manager Mathew Mendisco shared that the percentage of the General Fund dedicated to policing is 43%. To this, Mendisco justifies that “policing is expensive” and is a primary function of any municipality. He says, “primarily it is wages, and we have not had anyone leave for pay, but they are aware of Steamboat and Routt” where deputies start at \$78,000/year compared to Hayden which starts officers just above \$60,000/year. That's a big gap to fill with pep talk about culture and community service.

Note: Graphics show Law Enforcement as Percentage of General Fund Expenditures in 2023 Budgets across NWCCOG Region as reported by city and county managers.

Note about the Manager Insights series: The data collected for this series demonstrates the depth of knowledge among area managers and I felt honored to be entrusted with their candid reflections. Raw data will be shared directly back to managers and packaged data and quotes will be published only after review and with permission from each manager. I take responsibility for any inaccuracies or cumulative insights not directly attributed to one of my fine colleagues.

Northwest Colorado Council of Governments | P.O. Box 2308, 249 Warren Ave., Silverthorne, CO 80498

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