



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on July 27, 2021

Michigan County Officials Vote Themselves Bonuses From Federal COVID-19 Relief

While millions of Americans remain unemployed, commissioners of a Michigan county voted themselves and other county employees thousands of dollars in “hazard pay” out of federal COVID-19 relief funds.

On July 15, Shiawassee County commissioners, all of whom are Republicans, voted unanimously (except for one absent commissioner) to distribute American Rescue Plan Act money to county officials and employees. That cash was intended to help businesses and local governments weather the storm caused by government overreaction to the virus.



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According to [WILX-TV](#), “The average payment for each employee was \$2,100.” The minimum payment was \$1,000, though commissioners and other officials received many times that, reported the [Associated Press](#). Board of Commissioners Chairman Jeremy Root, County Administrator Brian Boggs, and Sheriff Brian BeGole received \$25,000 each. County Prosecutor Scott Koerner raked in half that. Commissioners John Plowman and Brandon Marks snagged \$10,000 each, while the other commissioners, except Root, got \$5,000 apiece.

When news of the bonuses broke, people not employed by the county were outraged — one even filed a lawsuit against it — but county officials were divided.

“I think that I earned it,” Commissioner Cindy Garber told WILX-TV. “I work really hard at this job. I was here in-person all through this crazy year.” Garber made \$14,000 in her part-time position last year and received a \$5,000 bonus “that she plans to spend,” the station noted.

Boggs — he of the \$25,000 payday — told the AP the bonus “was to the benefit of the employees,” though he neglected to mention to whose detriment, namely taxpayers, it was. Instead, he added petulantly, “Perhaps we should not pursue other ideas like this to get [county employees] additional funding if this is how it’s going to be received.”

Garber also told the AP that Root’s enormous bonus was justified because he “bears the burden of all emergency orders,” which surely comes as news to all the businesses, schools, and other institutions that were forced to close as a result of those orders. Just ask Shiawassee County barber [Karl Manke](#), who had to fight his business’s shuttering all the way to the State Supreme Court.

Commissioner Marlene Webster, on the other hand, said she was shocked when the extra \$5,000 appeared in her bank account — she claimed she thought she was only voting for small bonuses for county employees — and promptly posted a picture of the payment on Facebook. She told WILX-TV she was “giving the money back.”

Last week, Nichole Ruggiero of Owosso, the same town in which Manke plies his trade, [sued the board](#)



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[of commissioners](#) not so much for voting themselves money but for allegedly going about it in an underhanded way. She charged that the commissioners violated the state's Open Meetings Act by discussing the details of the bonus proposal in closed session and then voting on it after returning to open session.

A hearing was scheduled for Monday, but before that could even take place, Koerner issued a [statement](#) Friday saying the payments were illegal under the Michigan constitution, which prohibits additional compensation for elected officials "after services had already been rendered." Following that, all the commissioners and other elected officials said they would return their bonuses, though the fate of employees' checks remained uncertain.

"Since these payments were made, confusion about the nature of these funds has run rampant," the commissioners said in a statement. "[We] deeply regret that this gesture has been misinterpreted, and have unanimously decided to voluntarily return the funds to the county, pending additional guidance from the state of Michigan."

Webster, who apparently had no hand in drafting the statement, called it "an insult to the citizens of Shiawassee County."

On Monday, Genesee County Circuit Judge Mark Latchana [granted](#) Ruggiero's request for a preliminary injunction rescinding the payments until the commissioners meet again to reconsider them. One presumes they will be more circumspect in their deliberations next time.

"We hope every front-line worker who helped with the pandemic gets a reasonable and thoughtful hazard pay; we're not against supporting our community members and those who helped us," said Ruggiero's attorney, Philip Ellison. "What we don't support is those who are trying to take advantage of a pool of money that they're not entitled to."



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