

LI TOWN AND CITY WORKERS EARNING \$200G UP 51%

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INVESTIGATES

LI TOWN AND CITY WORKERS EARNING \$200G UP 51%

Police pay, overtime, retirement payouts among factors

The story was reported by **Carl MacGowan, Arielle Martinez, Joseph Ostapiuk** and **Tara Smith**. It was written by Ostapiuk and MacGowan.

A total of 211 Long Island town and city employees made \$200,000 or more in 2024, a nearly 51% increase over 2023, with police pay fueling the rise, a Newsday analysis found.

The number of town and city employees who made \$200,000 or more is up from 2023's total, 140. The lion's share of 2024's \$200,000-or-more earners — 145 employees — were members of a municipal police department, records show. A year earlier, the number of employees making over \$200,000 included 106 police department employees.

The number of \$300,000-plus earners also grew, doubling from 11 in 2023 to 22 in 2024, according to Newsday's analysis. Five employees made \$400,000 or more in 2024, up from three in 2023. One employee, a former Southold Town police chief, made nearly \$505,474 in 2024. His compensation included pay for unused sick and vacation time.

Newsday analyzed payroll data across Long Island's 13 towns and two cities, using records obtained under the state's Freedom of Information Law.

The growth in high earners is among several factors con-

tributing pressure to town and city budgets — and Long Islanders' cost of living. The municipalities are increasingly piercing the state's tax cap as they cite sharp jumps in the cost of employee pension and health care premiums.

Abdullah Ar Rafee, a data manager for the Empire Center for Public Policy, a fiscally conservative think tank based in Albany, said local government workers' pay has increased alongside ballooning benefits packages secured by "ironclad" union contracts.

The result, he said: climbing deficits and debt.

"This is very dangerous in terms of the future of these governments," Ar Rafee said. "It's a bubble that's waiting to burst."

In 2024, Long Island's towns and cities paid 20,141 employees a total of \$889 million, a 5.3% increase from the \$844 million paid in 2023. Across the Island, overtime pay grew at a faster clip: The municipalities paid more than \$48.5 million in overtime in 2024, up almost 10% from the prior year's total of nearly \$44.3 million, Newsday found.

Factors behind pay hikes

The rise in the steepest of salaries can be attributed to policy decisions old and new: Overtime calculations, struck decades ago and embedded into hard-fought union contracts, are a huge driver. And in some towns, new retirement incentives are causing

salaries to swell.

Officials across Long Island cited circumstances unique to their towns and cities that drove up employee pay in significant ways: Smithtown, for example, doled out more overtime last year as the town recovered from a devastating summer storm. In Babylon, a new initiative to clear litter in public spaces resulted in more overtime for town workers.

The combination of climbing payroll, pension and premium expenses continues to strain local governments, experts said.

"Pensions were not designed to last 30 years," said Anthony Basile, a professor of accounting and taxation at Hofstra University.

Municipal workers "have a much better pension than the rest of the population," Basile said. Workers can retire earlier than private sector employees and live into their 70s and 80s, raising the lifetime costs of those benefits.

Erik Breitwieser, president of the Patrolman's Benevolent Association of Southampton Town, defended the salaries in the East End police departments, saying it's difficult to recruit and retain officers in a region that's grown in population.

"Year to year, we have more calls. . . what used to be a summer vacation spot is more of a year-round place for many people," Breitwieser said. Departments are struggling to hire

and keep officers, he said. "We're trying to get through it. . . . With the population explosion out here, it's going to take a [higher] level of manpower that we should be at."

Highest overall earners

Martin Flatley, who became Southold's police chief in 2011, topped the list with a total pay of \$505,473.55 in 2024, according to payroll data. He received \$116,556.64 in base pay, according to town data, which showed he retired on June 25, 2024. Flatley's pay does not include any bonuses and "was just accrued time," Southold Town Comptroller Michelle Nickonovitz said.

Flatley retired as part of a disciplinary settlement. It followed an investigation into the way his department responded to a colleague's party during the COVID-19 shutdown in May 2020.

In 2022, Flatley received a 70-day unpaid suspension over the incident. The Southold Town Board unanimously voted to accept his retirement — which took effect in June 2024 — as part of the settlement, Newsday previously reported. After the suspension, Flatley agreed to retire and publicly apologize over the department's handling of the party.

In an interview, Flatley said the payout size reflects nearly a half-century on the job.

"Over the course of 45 years, I was not a person to take a lot of sick time," he said in a phone interview. "You assume all the responsibilities that go with that position. You're responsible for 75 to 80 employees in the police department, running it efficiently and running it professionally. . . . I had no problem justifying what I think I got at the end."

Charles Heine, Hempstead's town attorney, who also retired in 2024, made \$451,079.72, payroll data shows.

In Hempstead, 40 town employees surpassed the \$200,000 threshold last year — four times as many as in 2023.

Brian Devine, a Hempstead Town spokesman, said the town offered a retirement incentive in 2024 that reduced staffing levels to their lowest in a decade.

The town offered \$2,000 for each year of an employee's service — up to 20 years, and an additional \$3,000 for each year after that, Devine confirmed. He said the town borrowed about \$20 million to cover the retirement payouts. Hempstead expects to save a total of \$16.6

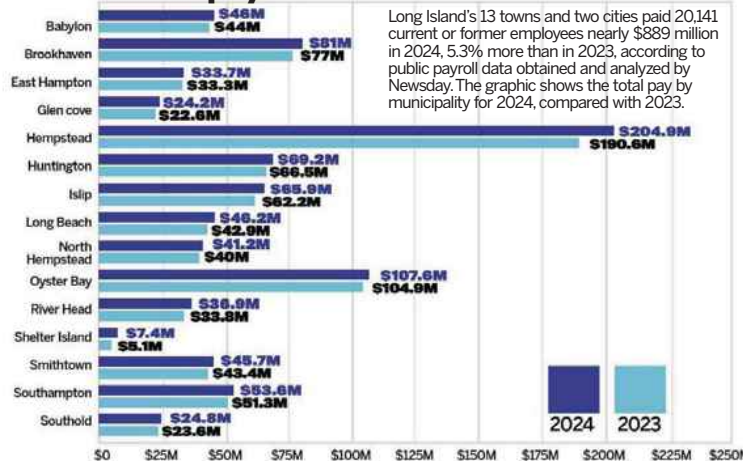


Unions impact payroll, said Richard Vogel, a dean at Farmingdale State College. ■ Video: newsday.tv

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- The number of Long Island's town and city employees who made more than \$200,000 rose 51% between 2023 and 2024, with much of the increase driven by police spending, Newsday found.
- Long Island's highest-paid employee in 2024 was Southold Town Police Chief Martin Flatley, whose retirement took effect last year as part of a settlement. His pay was nearly \$505,474, which included accrued time off.
- A total of 40 Hempstead Town employees earned more than \$200,000 in 2024, largely due to a retirement incentive the town offered. The number was up from 10 in 2023.

Total pay for LI's towns and cities



Long Island's 13 towns and two cities paid 20,141 current or former employees nearly \$889 million in 2024, 5.3% more than in 2023, according to public payroll data obtained and analyzed by Newsday. The graphic shows the total pay by municipality for 2024, compared with 2023.

million in payroll expenses in 2024 and 2025 as a result of the incentive, Devine said. The program resulted in a 5.9% reduction in town staffing levels.

The next three highest-paid employees were Long Beach police lieutenants who boosted their pay through a program that provides advanced retirement pay.

William Dodge earned

\$441,762.52; Stefan Chernaski earned \$410,242.09; and Richard DePalma earned \$403,533.18, the data shows.

The advanced pay is part of a contract provision negotiated in 2023 that allows workers to accept unused vacation and sick time over a six-year period before they retire, Newsday has reported. The deal helps lower the expense of retirement pay-

outs in Long Beach, which has surpassed \$1 million annually, city officials have said.

Overtime increases

While overtime among the Island's town and city workers rose 9.6% in 2024 over the prior year, Babylon saw the largest jump in that category: a 48% rise, from \$1.7 million in 2023 to \$2.5 million in 2024.

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Rich Schaffer, the town's supervisor, attributed the increase to a new initiative that clears litter near roadways. Through Operation CLEAN, employees from the highway, buildings and grounds, and environmental control departments pick up trash on weekends from April to November. The town has collected 345 tons of litter since April 2024, officials said.

Most of the litter is fast-food wrappers and other waste from products from businesses in the area. The town uses a surplus of fees collected from its commercial garbage fund to cover the overtime.

"The justification is, we have to spend all this time and effort picking up the litter — we don't expect the store owners to do that — but we have to do it, and it has to be paid for and we felt that was the best way to pay for it," Schaffer said.

Riverhead's overtime jumped nearly 31% between 2023 and 2024, going from \$1.3 million to \$1.7 million. The increase was in large part buoyed by police officers who logged extra hours.

Melissa Peekers, the town's payroll supervisor, expects overtime totals to come down as a result of an expansion of the police department. The town's police force grew in 2024 from 89 to 96 officers.

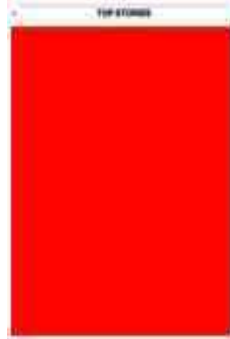
"Now our police force is bigger and able to handle the calls," she said. "And we're not having to hold people over or keep them on overtime because we have enough staff now to take care of it."

Smithtown's overtime increased nearly 30%, going from \$1.4 million in 2023 to \$1.8 million in 2024.

An August 2024 storm that flooded several parts of the town and a large swath of Suffolk's North Shore forced the Smithtown Public Library to close for seven months. The storm "required substantial emergency response and cleanup efforts across multiple departments," town spokeswoman Nicole Garguilo said in an email.

Shelter Island's overtime

See PAYROLL on A4



'BUBBLE THAT'S WAITING TO BURST'

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PAYROLL from A3

costs rose almost 45% in 2024 — from \$236,991 to \$342,852.

Supervisor Amber Brach-Williams said a large chunk of the increase — about \$70,000 — covered the shift of an officer sent to work on the East End Drug Task Force, a partnership of law enforcement agencies that investigates drug-related crimes. The cost was offset by a grant that includes proceeds from a state settlement with manufacturers of opioids, she said.

Other increases stemmed from paying employees to cover for others on leave, or to fill extra vacancies as they crop up, Brach-Williams said.

"We're just always monitoring it," Brach-Williams said of the expense. "Some of the police overtime is hard to manage, because when you have like the 10k [race] or Fourth of July fireworks, it's all-hands-on-deck. . . . We keep it to a minimum as much as possible."

Top overtime earners

Long Island's top five overtime earners included two Glen Cove emergency medical technicians, labor crew leaders in Huntington and Islip, and a Long Beach fire lieutenant.

Long Island's highest overtime earner in 2024 was Lt. Samuel Pinto, of the Long Beach Fire Department, who is both a firefighter and paramedic. He was paid \$122,293.57 in overtime last year, records show.

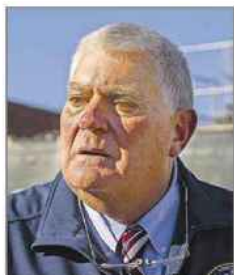
In a phone interview, Pinto said he worked extra shifts while the fire department had staff vacancies. Many of those vacancies have since been filled, he said.

"Those earnings are based on hundreds of hours being away from family and personal time, responding to emergencies," said Pinto, 41. "We work nights, weekends."

The Glen Cove employees included Christopher DeMetropolis, an EMT supervisor who earned \$114,837.21 in overtime on top of his \$107,951.08 base pay. His pay last year totaled \$234,560.87. Melvin Sanchez, an



Three Long Beach police lieutenants got a boost through a program that gives advanced retirement pay.



Riverhead Supervisor Tim Hubbard

EMT, earned \$94,488.59 in overtime and a total pay of \$184,317.97. DeMetropolis resigned from his position earlier this year, Mayor Pamela Panzenbeck said.

Nassau County's push to hire paramedics with competitive pay packages has made it difficult for Glen Cove to retain and hire EMTs, Panzenbeck said in an interview.

"We lost a lot of our full-time higher-level EMT staff," Panzenbeck said. "They left to go to the county."

DeMetropolis and Sanchez, who has since been appointed an EMT supervisor, were "willing to pick up extra shifts," Panzenbeck said.

The city is looking to raise salaries for EMT workers, but Panzenbeck said it'll be diffi-

cult to compete with the county's rates.

The third-highest overtime earner in 2024 was Sean Cavanagh, a highway department labor crew leader in Huntington. He earned \$102,054.59 in overtime on top of his \$116,937.64 base pay.

Islip Town highway labor crew coordinator John Hillenbrand earned \$95,128.53 in overtime in 2024, which nearly doubled his \$95,903.08 base salary, making him the fourth-highest overtime earner on Long Island.

Hillenbrand also is the acting deputy commissioner of Public Works, town spokeswoman Caroline Smith said in an email.

Smith wrote that Hillenbrand is "a long-tenured, vastly experienced member of our team."

She said Islip has 1,300 miles of roadway and 57 miles of waterfront, with a quarter of the town located in a flood zone.

"John is available 24/7, 365 days a year to address storm preparation in our low-lying areas including dispatching and overseeing crews that clear drains in advance of nor'easters; hurricanes; hazardous high tides; winter weather and dangerous high winds," she wrote.

Thad Calabrese, a professor at NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, said,

"Long Island has, in general, good public schools, good public safety." Taxpayers use those services, which are often labor-intensive, he said.

"Given the costs of the area and given that there are strong labor unions in the area, it's really expected that labor costs would be so significant on Long Island," said Calabrese, who focuses in public and nonprofit financial management.

'It's the going rate'

Tim Hubbard, the outgoing Riverhead Town supervisor, said police salaries were a key reason behind the town board's decision to pierce the state tax cap next year. The spending plan, which drew rebukes from residents, included average property tax increases of \$274 per household.

Operating a town police department means offering competitive pay for officers, he said. "You have to because it's the going rate," said Hubbard, a first-term Republican who lost his reelection bid in November by 37 votes. "There's a cost associated with doing that type of job."

A retired town detective, Hubbard said the alternative was to lay off employees. Riverhead also operates its own water district. "When you're putting payroll together, it does get more costly to support those things, but we are very

comfortable having our own water district and having our own police department," he said.

Richard Vogel, dean of Farmingdale State College's School of Business, said employee payrolls are largely dictated by union contracts.

High earners in an individual year, he said, are often the result of retirements and payouts that are cashed in when a worker retires.

"That's part of the contracts that are in place," Vogel said. "There's not much that the local governments can do."

Taxes pushing some to leave

Andrea Vecchio, a longtime taxpayer advocate from East Islip, said high municipal salaries are driving tax increases and pushing some Long Islanders to leave.

"I don't think people realize what our public servants are making these days. But I guess they would argue the fact that you have to make that much, but for the general public, that's not an average salary. Nowhere near it," Vecchio said in an interview. "I don't know what you can do about it."

"If you're making way more money than the people who are being taxed to pay your salary, there's an imbalance there," said Vecchio, who has focused much of her analysis over the years on teacher and school administrator salaries. "People are leaving, with really no end in sight. It seems like things keep going up."

Basile, the Hofstra professor, said pension systems that reward high overtime pay can drive up costs.

Some union contracts base average annual pension payments on the highest few years of an employee's pay, he said. When those workers are paid more overtime in their final years, he said, they're "artificially increasing their retirement benefits."

"In the private sector, there's financial stewardship," Basile said. "A municipality can't go out of business. A private company can."

Newsday's Denise M. Bonilla, Sam Knack, Alek Lewis, Jean-Paul Salamanca and Anastasia Valeeva contributed to this story.