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K-State employees may leave civil service

Employees will vote on whether to remove themselves from the Legislature's control

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A vote later this year at Kansas State University could see hundreds of state employees leaving civil service en masse.

Classified staff members at K-State are meeting this week to discuss the proposal to remove themselves from the control of the Legislature, which is allowed by law if employees vote to do so.

In that case, K-State's nearly 1,800 classified employees would be recategorized as "university support staff," with decisions concerning pay and other matters decided locally at the university.

"It's basically, who do you have more trust in, our local administration or a further removed administration?" said Carol Marden, chairwoman of a committee looking into the option. "My trust lays here at Kansas State."

The move would allow the university to make its own decisions concerning pay increases for employees, such as custodial staff, maintenance workers, and some administrative and supervisory jobs, which receive hourly wages and don't have contracts.

"We have some employees on campus who haven't had a raise since 2008," said Marden, herself a classified employee.

Marden's committee, formed by employees, has been preparing papers on potential changes to performance and evaluation procedures, discipline and job protections, recruitment and compensation. The meetings this week are to gather input from employees, she said. The staff won't vote until November.

Marden said there were two reasons to consider leaving civil service — cutting ties to the Legislature in terms of pay and ensuring flexibility in recruiting and evaluating staff members.

"We want our boss to be more in tune with what's actually happening with classified employees," she said.

Marden said the university had to follow standardized procedures for advertising classified positions that don't always match the skills the school is looking for.

"So it's not just money," Marden said. "The flexibility portion is extremely important to us."

If K-State employees become support staff, they will be the second group of university employees to do so.

Classified staff at The University of Kansas made the same move several years ago.

Now staff assemblies at other schools are meeting with employees from KU as they consider whether to follow suit, and those at Wichita State and Emporia State have formed committees, too.

Emporia's met for the first time last week.

"It's going to be one of those things that you have to go in slowly and do your homework," said Kim Massoth, chairwoman of the Emporia State Classified Assembly. "We're going to do all the homework and research with KU and K-State's help, so we're kind of piggybacking on them."

Marden and Massoth said KU's experience offered a chance to learn how the switch had played out and whether some aspects could be improved.

The local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, which has reportedly expressed concerns about the switch, and the president of the KU Support Staff Senate, hadn't responded to requests for interviews as of Tuesday evening.

By statute, classified employees retain their health and retirement benefits if they become support staff. The same statute bars universities from cutting pay or laying off employees who make that switch.

Asked whether employees would lose job protections, Marden said current procedures — including verbal warnings, written warnings and other steps — would stay in place and the school would create a board to make final calls on terminations.

"We have a good system here," Marden said. "It's all about employees and protecting them."

Marden's committee first formed in 2007 but shelved plans after the Legislature planned to adjust pay according to market rates. The committee resumed its work last year because the Legislature hadn't carried out those changes as expected, Marden said.

"At the beginning of every year the cost of living goes up," she said, "and the people that haven't gotten a raise since 2008, they're feeling it."

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