
Hall goals unclear, bonuses high; Convention execs' guidelines obscure: [All Editions]

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The state convention authority has long touted a private-sector approach to its \$800 million meeting hall under development in South Boston.

But when it comes to the tens of thousands in bonuses shelled out to its top executives, the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority may be stealing a page from old-time state government, critics say.

The state convention authority is expected to give bonus checks of close to \$150,000 this year alone to its top brass. But there is only sparse documentation to show how and why the big cash payouts were awarded. The authority's board has doled out the big awards based, in one case, on a laundry list of "accomplishments" submitted at year-end by its top executive. In another case, sales guru Milt Herbert picked up \$30,000 as a "signing bonus" just two months after his first day this spring.

The big paydays - which come atop some of the highest salaries in state government - have sparked ire in some quarters.

The taxpayer-financed meeting hall is costing tens of millions of dollars above original projections. Meanwhile, after millions spent on marketing, the hall is preparing to open next summer with only a handful of bookings for its first decade.

"They are getting rewarded for being hacks. That is what they are getting rewarded for in these kinds of general boondoggles," fumed Barbara Anderson, executive director of Citizens for Limited Taxation.

Overall, James Rooney, the authority's top executive; Howard Davis, a top official under Rooney; and Herbert, the sales chief, enjoy bonus payments that give significant lift to their six-figure salaries.

Rooney's base pay of \$224,000 rises to roughly \$280,000 with his bonus, while Davis' base, in the \$154,000 range, rises to \$184,000. Herbert is in line to pick up \$60,000 to \$90,000 in incentive pay his first year, on top of \$200,000 in base pay.

The criteria for the bonuses may be as troubling as their size, critics say.

Rooney and Davis, according to copies of contracts obtained by the Herald, are required to submit written goals at the beginning of the year. The contracts spell out a yearlong process in which the executives, working with the convention authority's board, set goals and come to an agreement on whether those goals have been met.

The Herald made repeated requests for documents outlining how bonus goals were set and awarded. The authority released a list of accomplishments Rooney submitted one year for his bonus, and a list of broad objectives presented by Davis covering two years.

Gloria Larson, a high-powered Hub lawyer and Republican activist who is chairwoman of the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority's board, offered a written statement defending the pay practices.

"Their performance has been remarkable," reads Larson's statement, which refers to the much criticized South Boston convention project as "one of the best run public works projects in the country."

There was virtually no record of the goals set for Rooney for any year in the documents released - or any hint of how they may have been reached. The one exception: a massive bonus that Rooney can expect to collect when the hall gets its city-awarded certificate of occupancy next year.

Rooney could see a one-time windfall of close to \$100,000 after the hall opens, the money coming out of his annual bonus and set aside in an interest-bearing account.

[Table]

-- There was also nothing to show how Davis was determined to

have met his goals, a mix of broad and more specific goals.

Meanwhile, the convention authority hired Herbert, a veteran trade show executive, to fire up an embattled sales effort that has netted only a handful of contracts.

But two-thirds of Herbert's bonus for his first year - \$60,000 - comes from meeting objectives not directly related to booking shows. Herbert can pull down an additional \$30,000 for meeting undefined booking goals, though no targets, written or otherwise, have been set.

- Lindalee Lawrence, a Wellesley-based compensation specialist who works with hospitals and local nonprofits, argued it is much better in the age of corporate scandals to have well-laid-out, written goals at the start of the year.

"It is better to lay it out on the front end so they know what they are supposed to be doing," she said.

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People: Herbert, Milt, Rooney, James, Davis, Howard

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