

Double or Nothing
From the WAPA Files

By Dave Berlin

“The Washington Public Employees’ Retirement System, or WaPERS, is a defined benefit retirement system, as opposed to our current defined contribution system,” said Melissa Rosenblatt, the tall, thin head of human resources. “All employees currently receive an additional 15 percent of their pay in the form of an IRA. The proposal you will be voting on will change that to a two percent at age 60 benefit, with a 50 percent buy in.”

At that point Andrew Calderon, a student attending the local junior college, stopped paying attention. He had been working at the Washington Area Power Alliance, or WAPA, for three years, and had been to plenty of all-hands meetings. Usually Philip Wolcott, the general manager, would get up in front of everyone and blabber on about a half dozen things nobody cared about, like the latest output at the combustion turbine plant. Andrew and the other students would wait for the end of the meeting, then rush up to the front to have cake before the old women got there. They always had cake to celebrate the employee birthdays for that month.

Today, however, was different. None of the other students were at the meeting, and Andrew only showed up because he got out of school early. Instead of Wolcott, Melissa Rosenblatt was talking about some new retirement system, although Andrew wasn’t interested. He liked the extra 15 percent the company gave him. The money went into his E-Trade account, and it was great for trying out new stocks he heard about from his friends.

Andrew turned to his former supervisor, Howard Ashworth, and said, “What is all this about? Should I be paying attention?”

Howard was smart and social; furthermore, he was Andrew’s mentor. He taught Andrew everything from computer hardware to office politics. Howard glanced at him and replied, “Probably not. They tried this PERS thing a couple of years ago, before you got here, and it didn’t pass.”

“So why are they trying it again?”

Howard shrugged and turned his attention back to the meeting, as things were starting to heat up in the room. Tiffany Schindler was asking why they were still pursuing the idea of PERS. Andrew suddenly became interested again. Tiffany was the prettiest administrative assistant in the office.

“Oh, sit down Tiffany, and let Melissa explain it,” said Edna Pauley, perhaps the most feared woman in the building. Her foul breath and coffee-stained teeth complemented her overall greenish, witchlike appearance.

“You just want to get your double retirement Edna,” came Tiffany’s reply. Russell Colin leapt to his feet. Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he stared down Colin. He was Wolcott’s evil crony and had a long history with the students.

Colin was a large man with a weak heart. His last attack was bad, and Colin's doctor told him to watch his diet. Andrew thought he was doing better now, only wolfing down medium pizzas for lunch, instead of his usual large combination with extra cheese.

"Everyone just relax for a second," Colin said. "Melissa has some important things to discuss, and everyone has a right to hear them. You will have your chance to vote for WaPERS in a couple of weeks, but for now let's just listen and hold our questions until the end." Colin waited for Tiffany to sit down before doing so himself.

Andrew tapped Howard on the shoulder. "Double retirement?"

"Yeah, Edna has been getting the IRA contributions the whole time she has been here. Now she could get PERS, which would mean another set of retirement benefits. So double retirement." Howard was whispering now because Melissa was glaring at them while she droned on.

After Melissa finished her rant about why PERS was so great, she changed the subject. Andrew was hoping that she would hurry so he could leave, not that he had any work to do. Howard had always kept him busy, but his new supervisor, Bruce Swanson, was rarely doing work himself and didn't care what his students did. Nonetheless, Andrew was eager to share the PERS news with the gang.

Instead, Melissa began her annual Safety Points review. "For those of you who are new, here at WAPA we reward employees for safe behavior. If you go an entire year without an accident, you will receive 20 safety points," Melissa said. "And for each safety meeting you attend, you will earn another 10 points. At any time you can redeem them for a prize. The awards catalog and the complete list of ways to earn points are coming around. Take a quick look. If you want to examine it further, just stop by my office. I will also tell you how many points you have."

Andrew took the list and catalog from Howard and opened the latter first. Inside were a number of household items along with the safety points needed to get them. There was a blender, 75 points; a set of knives, 60 points; for 250 points you could get a vacuum cleaner. A set of knives, Andrew thought, that's safe.

He passed the catalog down and picked up the list of points. It read:

Earning Points:

Attending a safety meeting: 10 pts.

One year accident free: 20 pts.

Implementing a safety enhanced system: 20 pts.

Saving a coworker's life: 50 pts.

Losing Points:

Participation in unsafe activities (here Andrew pictured himself running down the hallway with scissors in his hand): minus 10 pts.

Causing an accident: minus 20 pts.
Implementing an unsafe system: minus 20 pts.
Injuring another coworker: minus 50 pts.

Andrew passed that down too and by then the meeting was just wrapping up. As he walked through the double doors of the large conference room, he saw Edna swarming over the cake. Andrew chuckled to himself and headed back through the maze of cubicles to his own.

Once back at his desk, Andrew called the other students and told them to meet him in the break room. Jonathan and Billy were there when he walked in, sitting at one of the tables reading the Seattle Times.

“Okay, here’s the deal,” Andrew said. “They want to take our IRA away and replace it with a new plan called PERS. Howard told me that we can’t take advantage of this new system because we don’t work enough hours to qualify. He also told me that we can’t even vote since we’re not eligible.”

“That’s bullshit,” said Billy Kessinger. “I need that money for school.” Billy was a year younger than Andrew, and didn’t have the benefit of his parents paying for his tuition. Although there were penalties and taxes involved, Billy chose to withdraw from his retirement account to pay for tuition and books.

“Yeah, and I need to get the new Stanley Kubrick collection on DVD,” said Jonathan Sparkman. Jonathan was already rich, or at least, his parents were well off. For him, the IRA meant he could add to his impressive collection of 253 DVDs.

“Well, do you think it’s going to pass?” Jonathan asked after a moment. “They tried this a few years ago and it didn’t even come close.”

“Let’s try to figure it out,” Billy said. He pulled his pen off his right ear and ripped a sheet off his notepad. “We’ll write down everyone in the company and check off who we think will vote for PERS.”

“I know Tiffany Schindler won’t,” Andrew said as they looked over the completed list. “She was quite vocal against it in the meeting, although that jerk Colin practically jumped down her throat for it.”

“Okay, scratch her,” Billy said. “Who’s left?”

“What about the witches?” Jonathan asked. Of course he meant Edna Pauley and her friend Norma Crank, the two oldest and scariest women in the building. Jonathan figured even their grandkids had to be scared of them.

“Yeah, check them off. They’re old and this will mean double retirement. God knows they could use it,” Andrew said, causing his friends to laugh. It was a long running joke that employees at WAPA made much more money than they were worth.

“That’s everybody,” said Jonathan. He began counting up the votes. “Looks like 21 for PERS and only 19 against. Plus the two maybes.”

“Damn it. Are you sure?” asked Billy.

“Pretty sure. I counted them twice, and we were all pretty confident when we marked them down.”

“What are we going to do guys?” asked Andrew.

Before anyone could formulate a plan, Andrew’s supervisor walked into the break room. You could tell Bruce Swanson never worked just by looking at him. Maybe it was because he didn’t even have a crease in his pants, or because they looked like golf pants. Perhaps it was because he felt he needed two hours of “face time” every day, which meant he walked around chatting with various coworkers. Whatever it was, he certainly fit in at WAPA.

“What are you trouble makers up to?” he asked. “Looks like a little student convention in here.”

“Nothing boss,” replied Andrew. “We were just talking about the new retirement proposal.”

“It sounds good to me. I have six years of PERS from my last job,” Bruce said.

“There goes one of the maybes,” Jonathan muttered.

Andrew couldn’t quite get back into his work for the rest of the day. He tried to finish a report for his boss on market price fluctuations, but his mind wandered back to the meeting every time he got going. This wasn’t the first time the students had gotten screwed either.

There was, for example, the time Travis Crayton used all his vacation time during finals and didn’t show up for two weeks. That would have been fine, except for all the work he was supposed to do. So, out with vacation time for students. “Damn kids take enough time off anyway,” Russell Colin had said. “They already spend half the day at school.” Apparently Colin had never been a student, or had at least forgotten that they were supposed to go to school, sometimes even during work hours.

Then there was the office that Andrew and Billy had shared. It was much too big for two students, but it was unclaimed space, and they were happy to fill it. When business started booming, Colin repossessed their desks, along with the office, and put them both

into the same cubicle. He and the general manager, Philip Wolcott, figured that since they were only at work half the time, they only needed half the space.

There were little things too, like having to pay for sodas in the break room now, and not getting cell phones because they weren't full timers and, according to Colin, "didn't need to be contacted."

But taking away their retirement plan was going too far. Andrew cursed and slammed his fist on his desk, disrupting the delicate balance of Star Wars collectibles. Jonathan looked over at him from his cubicle. Andrew apologized. "I was just thinking about the PERS thing again."

Andrew couldn't help but think there was something he could do. If only he could tip the scales by a few votes. Perhaps he could talk to a few people and get them to change their minds. He could explain that the IRA was all the students had left, and without it, they would starve to death. That wasn't necessarily true, but it might work.

Andrew picked up the phone on the second ring. It was Bruce Swanson. "Hey boss man," Andrew said. "What's up?"

"I need you to crunch some numbers for me. You're going to have to run over to the plant and get the readings from them. Just ask the supervisor on shift. He'll know what I sent you for. Oh, and if you can have it done by the end of the day, that would be great."

"Okay, I'll get right on it."

Andrew crossed the street and jogged up to the small office that doubled as the operating room for the plant. Inside, the technicians were busy watching television and eating Bon-Bons. Apparently there wasn't a lot going on today, although Andrew couldn't remember a time when there was.

"Are you Bruce's student?" one of the technicians asked him.

"Yes."

"Greg is inside the plant. You'll have to track him down. He's got the report you need with him."

"Thanks." Andrew said as he backed out the door. It was cold outside, and he hurried along to the building housing the generator.

It was a huge concrete structure with small, maroon letters in one corner that read "WAPA CT 1." This was the combustion turbine that generated most of WAPA's power. Andrew opened the rusted metal door and stepped inside. Even though it was cloudy outside, it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. An attendant handed him a

package containing two small earplugs. “You’ll need these as you get close to the equipment. Greg is inspecting the unit downstairs.”

Andrew managed down the thin staircase into the noisy room below. Overhead hung two lights that barely illuminated the room. In the center was the giant turbine that generated all the power. It was indeed running; the noise was deafening, or would have been if Andrew hadn’t used the earplugs.

He saw Greg standing next to the machine. Andrew went over to him and Greg handed him a large envelope with the readings. “Just finished,” he mouthed.

“Thanks!” Andrew yelled. He headed back up the stairs and through another door closer than the one he came in. He stepped outside and saw that he was behind the warehouse. There was a long ditch running about 20 yards away from him. Andrew looked in and saw a series of what appeared to be conduits. There were large, yellow signs on the middle conduit: “DANGER: EXTREMELY LARGE CURRENT. DO NOT TOUCH.”

Then he looked up and saw the strangest thing: Edna Pauley, the old witch from the legal department, was staring at a little meter coming out of the ground and scribbling on a note pad. Andrew laughed. She looked as if she was examining it to see if it was the right ingredient for her witches’ brew.

Edna turned and saw him. “Ah, one of the students. What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Just getting some numbers for my boss.” Andrew held up the envelope.

Edna changed the subject. “I saw you at the meeting this morning. I hope they convinced you students to vote for PERS.” Apparently, she didn’t know the students weren’t allowed to vote, but that didn’t stop Andrew.

“No, not really,” he said. “I don’t think anybody deserves double retirement.”

At this Edna’s mouth dropped open. Then she closed it, looked as if she was about to say something, and then pursed her lips. Finally she spoke. “I hope you don’t mean that boy. And if you’d like to keep your job you might want to think carefully about which way you vote.”

Andrew had never been more upset in his life. “Tiffany was right about you!” He yelled. “You’re just a greedy old witch!” Edna, perhaps thinking she had overdone it, was backing up as Andrew advanced. “I hope you and Norma die before the vote!”

Edna gasped and stepped backward. She slipped on a puddle from the rain the night before and tumbled into the ditch behind her, landing with a large thud. After a minute, she rolled over and began to pull herself up. But instead of reaching toward the side of the ditch she fell in on, Edna grabbed the middle conduit.

Andrew always thought those warnings were a joke. However, WAPA made real power, and it was no joke. Edna screamed and a burnt odor wafted up to his nose. Andrew just stared, and to him it seemed as if she glowed. Blue sparks were flying off the conduit, rising high in the air and falling slowly back to the ground. Edna shook violently and then collapsed.

After she stopped moving, an image flashed in front of Andrew's eyes. They were numbers: 21-19-1. Andrew had no idea what they meant but he didn't have time to think about it.

Workers from the plant were starting to look for whatever had just happened. They were yelling and Andrew faintly heard something about "check the conduits." He looked down at Edna one last time. She was dead, that was for sure. He took off running.

"I can't believe it. As long as I've been here, Edna has been too," Billy was saying. It was the day after Edna's "accidental" death. Both Billy Kessinger and Jonathan Sparkman had deeply troubled looks on their faces.

"I never really liked her," said Jonathan, "but it is creepy. Fried to a crisp."

"Well, you know guys, at least it helps with the PERS vote." Andrew had realized shortly after the incident what those numbers meant: 21 votes for PERS, 19 votes against, and one maybe.

Billy and Jonathan turned to look at him. Jonathan was the first to comment: "You're sick Andrew."

"Yeah, that's a pretty crappy thing to say," said Billy. "Even if we did hate her."

That night Andrew decided not to tell them what really happened. It was 1:00 in the morning, and Andrew was sitting on the couch thinking about it. The room was dark, but the light from the television was illuminating his face, which was scrunched up in a weird way. He wasn't watching TV. Instead, he was looking past it, seeing Edna twitching, the sparks dying down around her.

"It's so close now; only three more votes," Andrew whispered. "I need to find out about that maybe. Then I can decide what must be done. Not that I want to kill anybody else, I mean, I didn't kill Edna, that was an accident, but it's just so close."

The next day Andrew went straight to Travis Crayton's desk. Travis had been a student some time ago, but Andrew didn't know him that well. "Travis," he began, "what do you think about PERS?"

Travis straightened up a little and said, "Well, it's a nice enough system, I suppose. The fund is professionally managed and there is less risk that you could lose your whole portfolio."

“Cut the crap Travis. Are you going to vote for it?”

Travis looked at Andrew’s bloodshot eyes and decided to answer truthfully. “I don’t think so. I am really into stocks right now, and I want to manage my own portfolio.”

“Great. Nice talking to you.” Andrew walked away from Travis’s desk. Travis sat there, staring after Andrew, wondering what that was all about.

Back at his desk, Andrew counted again. With Travis’s vote it was 21-20. If only someone could be persuaded to switch their vote. He thought of Norma Crank, Edna’s best friend at WAPA. If Edna was the evil witch, Norma was the not-quite-as-evil witch. That didn’t make her an angel, but it was worth a try.

Andrew confronted Norma in the storeroom toward the rear of the building. She had gone in there for some documents in one of the fireproof filing cabinets, and Andrew followed and closed the door behind him.

“So, Norma, I was sorry to hear about Edna,” said Andrew.

“Oh, you scared me there. Who is that?” Norma asked, peering through a large shelf filled with cardboard boxes.

“It’s me, Andrew. I was just wondering if Edna’s death had changed your mind about voting for PERS at all?”

“What does one have to do with the other Andrew?”

“I don’t know. It’s just that...” He paused.

“Yes? Go on.”

“Well, it was such a freak accident. It seems like this PERS thing is bad luck. Edna was so determined to get PERS that she had that accident. And what with you losing such a close friend, I thought you would be thinking of other people right now. I’m sure you know that PERS steals 15 percent of the students’ pay.” He knew that sounded stupid, and it was almost a threat, but that was all that came out.

“That is just ridiculous. Now listen to me, you little worm. You worthless students don’t deserve the meager paychecks you get. Now get lost before I have you fired.”

Again, that trigger went off in Andrew’s head. He turned to leave and then suddenly spun around and pushed the shelf between him and Norma. He only did it to scare her, but once more he did far worse.

The shelf shook violently as the precariously balanced boxes shifted. A large brown box on the top shelf teetered on its side and fell off. It struck Norma with a large crash and broke apart on impact. It cracked Norma's skull and she died within a minute or so. After she stopped breathing, Andrew saw a brilliant flash: 20-20. This time he knew what it meant.

Andrew ignored the body. Instead he was staring at the pile of binders that fell out of the box that killed Norma. He picked one up. It was thick and black, with gold letters: "Congratulations on joining the Washington Public Employees' Retirement System (WaPERS)." Below that, in smaller print, "Enclosed is the information you need to begin your journey."

Andrew was fuming; he kicked the box over, revealing the address label:

WAPA
Attn: Russell Colin

This was too much. Did they even intend to count the votes from the employees? Andrew thought they should, since it was going to be closer than expected now. He tried to stuff the binder under his shirt, but it bulged too much; instead he tucked it under his arm and walked out.

The next day everyone in the office was talking about Norma's death. Some theorized it was an accident; others felt it had to be more than coincidence that two people had died in less than a week. However, not many suspected Andrew Calderon was on a murderous rampage.

Russell Colin, who had led the crusade to end student benefits, had a slightly better idea than the rest. He took the security tape from the power plant into the general manager's office. Colin and Philip Wolcott watched in silence as Andrew seemingly drove Edna back into the ditch, watched as she was electrocuted, and then fled the scene.

"What are we going to do about this wretched student?" asked Colin.

"We wait for the next attack," said Wolcott.

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"That won't be necessary, Russell. I'll deal with him myself."

That night Andrew sat at his desk, staring at the blank screen on his computer. After everyone else had gone home, he got up, took the PERS binder out of a drawer, and stepped out into the quiet hallway.

WAPA was an old, one-story building just large enough to hold its 40 or so employees. Security cameras and an electronically locked door guarded the entrance. Inside, the

layout was simple: cubicles filled the building, creating a tall, gray maze. Surrounding those were the real offices with large oak doors. One was the conference room; others belonged to Philip Wolcott, Russell Colin, and Melissa Rosenblatt.

The hallway leading to Colin's office was empty. His desk faced away from the door, and he was munching on a big bag of chips and updating the spreadsheet tracking his multitude of stocks, bonds, and mutual funds. Colin spent most of his time managing his money, and loved certain stocks in his portfolio more than his children.

"Stop right there," Colin said from behind his plush executive chair. He swung around to face Andrew. "I imagine you've come to kill me too, like you did to Edna and Norma."

"Kill you? I just wanted to know why these binders were in the storage room." Andrew raised the binder over his head as he spoke.

Colin reached behind him and grabbed a thick book on his desk. "Oh, come on Andrew, I know what you did to Edna. I saw how you threw her into the ditch to die. And I can only imagine how you savagely beat Norma to death."

"I didn't kill anybody!" Andrew yelled back. He swung the binder forward and threw it on the ground, breaking one of the flaps. PERS documents fluttered lazily around the room.

Colin freaked at the sudden movement and, not wanting to face Edna's or Norma's fate, threw the book at Andrew.

It nailed Andrew in the head and he fell to the ground, where he lay unconscious. Colin sighed and leaned back in his chair. Then he stumbled to his feet as the pain went coursing through his left arm.

Colin's heart had given out. He clutched his chest and landed on the floor next to Andrew. Before he passed out, he cursed the damn kid, not only for trying to murder him, but for trying to rob him of his deserved retirement.

"You awake yet kid?" Andrew heard as he regained consciousness. His head hurt and his brain told his hand to massage it, but it didn't work. For some reason he couldn't control his legs either.

"We tied you up sport, in case you tried that whole psycho thing on us," the voice was saying.

Andrew opened his eyes to find that it was the general manager, Philip Wolcott. He smiled at Andrew beneath his greedy black eyes and straight black hair.

"Ah, you are awake. Just in time for the trial. We've decided to prosecute in house."

Andrew looked around the room and realized he had never seen this part of the building before.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“We’re just a few feet below my office,” Wolcott replied. “Now let’s summon your jury.”

A door in the far corner of the room opened and 12 people walked in and sat down at a long table on Andrew’s left. There was another table on a raised platform in front of Andrew, and Wolcott was making his way toward it. Andrew sat behind a third table, and there was little else in the room, at least that he could see. It was poorly lit and he shivered as Wolcott spoke.

“You have been accused of murdering Edna Pauley and Norma Crank. You also caused Russell Colin to have a heart attack. Worse yet, you did all this to stop PERS from being voted in. Unfortunately for your little plan, Russell only had a mild attack. He is recovering in the hospital and will be back in time for the vote.”

Wolcott glared at him and went on. “I have informed the jury here of the details of your escapades, so we’ll go straight to the deliberations.”

Andrew looked at the jury of his “peers.” There sat 12 of his coworkers, and he knew why they were chosen: all were on the list of PERS supporters.

Melissa Rosenblatt stood up. “We have already made our decision and are ready to proceed with the verdict.”

“Very well Melissa. You may proceed,” said Wolcott.

“We find the defendant guilty,” she said.

“But I didn’t even have a trial,” Andrew blurted out.

“Shut up!” yelled Wolcott. “You don’t deserve a trial, maggot!”

Wolcott picked up his gavel. “The defendant has been found guilty. Now for his sentencing.”

“Sentencing?” Andrew said, although it was barely audible.

Wolcott was staring at him intently, his eyes fixed upon him, unblinking. “Do you know the penalty for murder?” Wolcott roared. “100 safety points!”

“What?”

Wolcott ignored him. He picked up a pen in his free hand and began scribbling on a scrap of paper in front of him. "Now let's see...two murders, that's 200 safety points...subtract that...borrow from there...ah, now you have negative 40." Wolcott banged his gavel on the table in front of him.

Andrew sat, dumbfounded, waiting for the police to come tearing into the room to haul him off. It wasn't as if they were just going to take away some stupid safety points and let him go. Wolcott motioned to one of the jurors. The man walked over and untied the rope holding Andrew's feet and hands together.

"You're free to go Andrew," Wolcott said.

"I don't know what the hell is going on," Andrew said, "but I can't believe this is all you're going to do to me."

"Well yes, there is one more thing. Have you ever heard of anyone having negative safety points?"

"No, I haven't."

"There is actually a little known company bylaw. If you ever have less than zero safety points," Wolcott said as his voice rose into a piercing scream, "YOU'RE FIRED!"

A week later the vote was cast. Andrew's friends Jonathan and Billy walked past the desk where Andrew had sat and plotted his murders. They stopped for a moment, stared thoughtfully, and then marched off to the large conference room.

Philip Wolcott stood at the head of the table. Billy and Jonathan watched as their coworkers checked off their ballots and passed them forward. Melissa Rosenblatt counted them twice, wrote something down on a slip of paper, and passed it to Wolcott. He looked solemnly at the crowd of employees for a moment before speaking.

"There were 19 votes in favor of switching to the new retirement system, WaPERS."

Jonathan and Billy exchanged confused looks.

"And 21 votes in favor of keeping the current IRA system."

The cheers from half the crowd drowned out the moaning and curses of the other. Billy and Jonathan stood up and clapped, and were joined by the lovely Tiffany Schindler and, surprisingly, Andrew's boss Bruce Swanson. He would later explain to the students that the PERS from his old job was out of state and would not transfer.

"Screw 'em," he had said. "If they won't combine the two systems, I don't want to be in either. Plus," he added, "I knew how much Wolcott wanted this thing to pass, and he pissed me off when he fired Andrew." With that, he had smiled and walked off.

“Andrew was sick, but I think he was just looking out for his friends,” Billy later said. This was the first time they had talked about Andrew since the trial.

“I just can’t believe someone would do that for money. I mean, we are already paid pretty well. We aren’t even saving our IRA for retirement,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, speaking of which,” Billy said with a smile, “Let’s go withdraw our latest deposits and get some lunch.”

“Good idea,” Jonathan said, “and after that we can go to Best Buy and pick up some new DVDs.”