

Lockport Union-Sun & Journal (NY)
NY lawmakers eye pay hike

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ALBANY - A pay hike could be in store soon for state lawmakers, whose base salaries of \$79,500 annually haven't budged since 1999.

Helping to insulate lawmakers from having to tee up pay hikes for themselves, a special five-member commission has been set up to examine the issue. It is slated to meet in Manhattan, approximately 150 miles south of the Albany statehouse, on Tuesday.

Advocates for salary increases note that when inflation is factored in, the buying power of the current salary has been shrinking year after year.

But critics of the idea point out the job is part-time, and 46 states have managed to run their statehouses by offering lower pay to their lawmakers than the sums in the pay envelopes of New York's senators and Assembly members.

It's unclear if the commission, whose members include state Comptroller Tom DiNapoli, will discuss their views as to whether lawmakers have done enough to earn a pay raise.

But if the commissioners speak to such state government watchdogs as John Kaehny, director of the advocacy group Reinvent Albany, they might think twice before recommending that more money be ladled out from the state treasury to lawmakers.

"A pay raise may be long overdue but that doesn't mean they deserve one, given the total lack of inaction on increasing accountability and strengthening rules to prevent corruption," Kaehny said in an interview.

Kaehny argued that the New York Legislature has consistently shirked one of its primary functions -- holding oversight hearings of the executive agencies under the control of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat who this week won a third term at the statehouse.

"Our state legislators are afraid of confrontations with the governor, so they just don't do hearings," Kaehny said.

Most state lawmakers receive extra pay for undertaking committee assignments. And most are eligible for per diem pay of \$174 when they have to stay overnight in Albany.

The two states offering the highest salaries to its lawmakers are California, where the annual pay is \$104,115, and Pennsylvania, where legislators earn \$86,478.50 each year, after getting a small raise last year.

Among those who say they are content with the current pay package in Albany is Assemblyman Billy Jones, D-Chateaugay. Jones also said he voted against the creation of the commission.

"I took this job knowing what the salary was going in," said Jones, a former state corrections officer who previously served as chairman of the Franklin County Legislature.

Spokesmen for senators Rob Ortt, R-Niagara County, Jim Seward, R-Milford, and Betty Little, R-Queensbury, all said their bosses are not among the lawmakers who are clamoring for pay hikes.

Cuomo told reporters in March that he wants to ban the ability of lawmakers to earn outside income, arguing that being a member of the Senate or Assembly should be a full-time position. He reasoned that stopping lawmakers from representing clients outside of their legislative duties would help deter the kinds of conflicts of interest that breed corruption.

Those pushing for pay raises tend to be the downstate contingent of lawmakers, as they represent a region with a higher cost of living than upstate.

Previous efforts to hike the pay of lawmakers have stumbled.