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CONFER: The state Legislature doesn't deserve a raise

Staff Writer

When working in the private sector, pay raises are contingent on one of or a combination of three things: The merit and successes of the individual, the current and projected health of the organization and the health of the overall economy.

Because of the final factor (and its contributions to the second), annual raises of any measurable size have become something of a rarity since the days of the Great Recession. Nationally, wages are expected to rise by 3.1 percent in 2019, the highest rate since 2008.

Despite the working class consistently struggling to secure wage growth, the political class thinks they are free of such encumbrances. It has been the buzz in Albany, yet again, that state legislators are looking for a raise. They currently make a base salary of \$79,500 and want to take it up to as much \$100,000 - never mind that their real wage is already well above that mark after taking into consideration committee bonuses and the \$174 per diem benefit for when they are in Albany. And, on top of that, they can retire with mighty fine pensions.

When you consider the three factors behind raises, our senators and assemblyman aren't deserving of a \$20,500 raise, let alone one of \$2,465 (which is what it would be were they to see just 3.1 percent like their constituents).

Let's first consider the merits of in the individual. \$79,500 is a rather exorbitant sum to be paying a part-timer. These positions were devised to offer regular people a chance to contribute to the social, economic and legal development of the Empire State by having sessions for six-calendar months per year and during those sessions mandating 0 to 4 days per week in the state capital (the legislative calendar showed only 61 in-session/budget days for the year). When the six months were up or when the legislature wasn't in session during the week, the legislators could go back to their "real jobs" on the farm, in their offices and plants, or at home raising their families.

Sadly, the system's been mutilated so much that people are led to believe that being a legislator is a full-time, year-round job equipped with regional offices and full-time staffs. Realistically, under such circumstances, one could look at the second half of the year as being nothing more than politics, rather than policy, a means to perpetuate incumbency through alleged necessity and importance. Really, what does attendance at parades and dinners contribute to the overall welfare of our state?

So, we need to look at the seats for what they are and what they should be - part-time, supplementary gigs - and realize that we cannot permit their income growth.

Now, let's look at the organization through which they are employed. The state government headed into a budget gap of \$4.4 billion this year, which the governor and legislature filled at the last minute by adding a bevy of revenue generators (taxes). This gap which followed a budget year with a deficit that was projected to be \$3.5 billion but was actually closer to twice that. Deficits are the normal way of business in Albany. If the fiscal health of the state is directly attributable to their budgets, the laws that they introduce, and the tough-but-necessary cuts they are afraid to make, then how do the legislators

deem themselves worthy of reward? If anyone ran a company like they run a state, that individual would be among the ranks of the unemployed, either through termination or the likely total collapse of their firm.

And, it's that factor that leads to the last: the overall health of the economy. Every bill among the hundreds passed every year by the legislature either steals rights and freedoms or adds to the cost of living and doing business in New York state. Because of that, existing businesses (not the new ones which are granted special favor and public charity like Amazon or Solar City) face incomprehensible government-created financial burdens when compared against their competitors from other states. That has forced businesses to stagnate/downsize/close/leave, which in turn has caused the same to happen to our residents, young and old alike: In the period from 2011 to 2016, another 850,000 people left New York state for greener pastures.

It's that final factor of assessing job performance that is the most damning to our legislators. They are complicit in the destruction of the once accurately-named "Empire State." They've driven our government to ruin, which has done the same to our economy and to each and every one of trying to work and live in it.

Only politicians would think they deserve bigger paychecks for that.

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By DAILY NEWS EDITORIAL BOARD

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The way to get the pay: Legislators must give up outside income and lulus to claim higher salaries



More pay, more reform. (Hans Pennink / AP / AP)

The special committee considering boosting Albany lawmakers' pay, which has been frozen at \$79,500 for 20 years, will be taking public testimony on Thursday and Friday.

This Editorial Board thinks an inflation-based hike of 54% to \$122,100 is fair, barring reform. But the figure can go higher if the panel bans extra pay for favored members, called lulus, and outside income.

What's needed is for the panel — State Controller Tom DiNapoli, city Controller Scott Stringer and former state and city Controllers Carl McCall and Bill Thompson — to ask to hear from legislators themselves, because if they buy into necessary reforms, that will seal the deal for change.

Two years ago, Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie sought inflation-based raises. He should update that and pledge to kill lulus and outside earnings. Incoming Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins should put in writing the same thing. Prove it's truly a new day in Albany.

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Richard Brodsky: Legislators' pay shouldn't be a political bargaining chip

By Richard Brodsky

Updated 7:21 am EST, Monday, November 26, 2018

While I served in the Legislature, a governor of the state offered me money if I supported bills he wanted to pass. I hasten to add that this governor was and is a person of strong moral character and a decent, honest public official.

The money I was offered came in the form of a proposed pay raise. And he isn't alone. A chorus of reformers, editorialists and other governors repeatedly propose the same bargain. Vote for what I think is good legislation and legislators get a pay raise.

It's an awful and disgraceful bargain. It's also, in my view, illegal. State law reads: "A person who gives or offers money, or any promise therefor, to a member of the Legislature to influence such a member or person to give or withhold his vote" is guilty of bribery.

The irony is that most of the folks proposing this corrupt bargain are so-called reformers. Apparently, the techniques that are justly condemned and prosecuted so often are fine and dandy if applied to a pay raise. Campaign finance reform is the current trade bait, but banning outside income, or charter schools, or on-time budgets are all on someone's list.

The rhetoric is high-minded and elegant. The offers made to me back then and those being made now are somehow viewed as appropriate politics, the kind of trade-off that we all know goes on every day.

It doesn't. It isn't. It's blackmail.

There are very compelling arguments for all kinds of reform, for and against charter schools and timely budgets. But once it's OK to trade money for votes on any issue, it's OK on every issue. You want to improve the ethical climate in Albany, start by eschewing bribery in any form.

The Legislature and commissioners of the state are underpaid, without a raise in 20 years. It is hard — and close to impossible in New York City and other high-cost areas — to pay rent, buy food and otherwise raise a family in New York on the amounts currently paid.

The cynical exploitation of the failures and unpopularity of the Legislature make this possible, as does the willingness of governors George Pataki, Eliot Spitzer, David Paterson and Andrew Cuomo to use a pay raise as a club to get their agendas advanced. It is now impossible to legislate intelligently about compensation. The result has been a series of jerry-built commissions trying to dance around the political difficulties and finally get a raise done.

Here we are again, with a commission again wrestling with how to do the right thing. The folks on the commission are smart and honorable, and it is devoutly to be hoped that they get it done this week. Without the blackmail and horse-trading that continue to poison the well.

For the record, the reform agenda embraced by the blackmailers is important and necessary. Neither the Legislature nor the governor has done well by important reforms, most critically the need to end legal bribery by campaign contribution. But you will never, ever improve the moral sensibilities of elected officials by insisting on the very tactics you otherwise lambaste. Raise the damn pay.

Richard Brodsky is a former state Assembly member.

Foss: Legislators still don't deserve a raise

Sara Foss | November 26, 2018

It doesn't matter whether you or I think giving New York's legislators a pay raise is a good idea.

What matters is what Gov. Andrew Cuomo thinks.

And he thinks it's a good idea.

"They come to Albany, they're away from their family for days on end, they make tremendous sacrifices," the governor said earlier this month on The Capitol Pressroom. "And I know it's not popular to say, but I believe they deserve a raise. I believe there should be reforms also, but I do believe they deserve a raise."

Well, there you have it.

Cuomo has given legislative pay raises his stamp of approval, which means it's only a matter of time before the four-member, all-male New York State Compensation Committee signs off on them.

The group will hold a public hearing in Albany on Wednesday, but the decision on whether to grant lawmakers a pay raise has likely been made. Which leaves us with the big, as-yet-to-be-answered question: How big will they be?

My longstanding position is that the Legislature doesn't deserve a raise.

A succession of lawmakers have been tried, convicted and sentenced to prison for a variety of misdeeds, but the Legislature has steadfastly refused to address the corruption in its midst. Legislators should enact meaningful ethics reforms, and then make the case that they deserve a salary bump.

Instead, the public is being treated to a lot of earnest chatter about how hard legislators work, how they're underpaid and how a more generous base salary will attract a better pool of legislators.

This is nonsense, for a number of reasons.

For one thing, New York's lawmakers are already among the highest paid in America, earning \$79,500, second only to legislators in Pennsylvania and California. In addition, some of New York's legislators receive generous stipends of between \$9,000 and \$41,500 for leadership positions or committee chairmanships.

In short, New York's legislators are doing perfectly fine -- better than the average lawmaker and better than the average American.

Cuomo has suggested that legislative jobs should be full time and that there should be restrictions on lawmakers' ability to have outside income.

The thinking, I suppose, is that making the Legislature go full time would justify their higher pay, and it's a line of thinking that's tough to argue with.

But it ignores the larger question of whether voters really want or need a full-time Legislature, or whether a full-time Legislature is in the best interests of the electorate.

I'm not convinced that it is, and my feeling is that New Yorkers haven't had much of an opportunity to express their thoughts on what they want their state Legislature to look like.

That's by design, of course.

In the past, lawmakers voted for their own raises, which helped keep their salaries in check.

Legislative pay increases are unpopular, and lawmakers generally balk at enraging their constituents.

What the New York State Compensation Committee does is shift the burden of giving legislative raises from the Legislature to a small group of politically connected appointees: state Comptroller Tom DiNapoli, who is himself up for a raise; State University of New York Board of Trustees Chairman H. Carl McCall; City University of New York board Chairman William Thompson; and New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer.

It's a flawed, sneaky, un-democratic process, and it minimizes both public input and the inevitable public backlash.

By the time most New Yorkers realize legislative pay raises were on the table, the committee will have done its work.

I would love to hear legislators make the case for why they deserve a raise.

But they're not going to do it.

That alone should kill the idea of legislative pay increases for at least another two years.

But it won't.

Don't be surprised if, come January, legislators are earning more money, whether they deserve to or not.

Reach **Sara Foss** at sfoss@dailygazette.net. Opinions expressed here are her own and not necessarily the newspaper's.