

# Pay raises need roll-call votes

By TIM KIEFER

In the midst of a national economic crisis and a \$5.7 billion state budget deficit, our state legislators' salaries increased at the beginning of 2009 by 5.3 percent. After this \$2,530 annual raise, our state representatives and senators now earn \$49,943 annually, plus an average of \$11,500 in per diem payments.

A few local legislators are returning their raises to the state treasury. They are Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Waunakee, and Reps. Keith Ripp, R-Lodi, Brett Davis, R-Oregon, and Gary Hebl, D-Sun Prairie. Of those legislators who are keeping the pay raise (all but 17 of Wisconsin's 132 legislators), most have refused to respond to news media inquiries regarding the raise or even confirm they are accepting the raise.



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In 2008, when I unsuccessfully ran for the Assembly, I pledged to accept only one-half of the legislative salary (\$23,700, based on the pre-raise salary level of \$47,413). When faced with a massive state budget deficit, everyone has to share the pain, and that should start at the top. I argued that Wisconsin's legislative salaries are in the top ten among the 50 states, but Wisconsin is nowhere near the tenth-largest state.

A pay cut of the magnitude I was advocating would have brought Wisconsin in line with the legislative salaries of other Midwestern states of a similar size to Wisconsin, such as Indiana (\$22,616), Minnesota (\$31,141), and Iowa (\$25,000).

But in retrospect my pay cut pledge may have missed an even more fundamental issue. Wisconsin needs to change the way it sets legislator salaries.

Under current law, legislative salaries are set by a legislative committee called the Joint Committee on Employment Relations (JCOER). This committee is made up of eight legislators from both the Senate and the Assembly. They receive a pay proposal from a bureaucratic agency called the Office of State Employment Relations (OSER) and then vote it up or down.

The 2009 pay raise had its beginnings back in 2007, when OSER recommended the pay raise and JCOER approved it. Once the committee approved OSER's recommendation, it went into effect automatically at the beginning of 2009.

Sound confusing? It is.

The system is set up in a way that avoids any real accountability to the taxpayers. The legislators who aren't on the committee (124 of Wisconsin's 132 legislators) can say that they never voted for a pay raise. The eight committee members can say that they were merely approving a pay increase which was recommended to them by the bureaucrats.

It wasn't always this way. The current setup dates to 1983. Prior to that date, legislators had to vote on their own salaries.

In 1981, The Legislature rejected a proposed pay increase of 7 percent. As a result, legislators came up with the current system, which promptly resulted in a 20 percent pay raise in 1985. Since that date, the current system has produced steady pay increases for legislators.

Some argue that unless we pay our legislators high salaries, the "best and the brightest" will be unwilling to serve. Others may argue that without generous pay and regular raises, then only the financially secure or those in occupations with flexible schedules will be interested in legislative work. Some may even say that there is something uniquely complex about Wisconsin's state government such that Wisconsin's legislators need to be paid twice as much as legislators in states such as Iowa and Indiana.

Let's have that debate. And let's have it out in the open, with hearings, floor debates and roll-call votes by all 132 of Wisconsin's legislators. It's time to abolish the no-accountability system we have now. Any legislative pay increase should be approved and passed just like any other legislative bill.

WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL  
MARCH 27, 2009

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