

## Capitol pay rise next on agenda?

**Timing is crucial in politics and this could be the time**

By Jimmy Vielkind

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ALBANY — There is no formal discussion of a legislative pay raise, state lawmakers insist — one breath before refusing to rule out an increase and, in some cases, listing its merits.

"Anything's possible with the New York State Legislature. Look: two on-time budgets. That proves anything is possible," said Assemblyman Jim Tedisco, R-Glenville.

Swimming beneath the on-time passage of the state budget last week was the belief that legislators, whose base pay is currently \$79,500, might attempt to parlay public goodwill for their accomplishment into reward. Service in the Assembly and Senate remains, technically, a part-time job.

Lawmakers gave themselves a 36 percent pay increase in 1999, the last time their pay was raised. Any pay hike approved this year wouldn't go into effect until 2013 when the new Legislature is seated.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan, said in January that it was time for a pay hike. Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a fellow Democrat whose fiscal platform has been more conservative, did not immediately rule out the idea.

"We have had no discussions about a pay raise, and I would have to think it through," Cuomo said during a radio interview last week. "But I'd like to reiterate: I give full kudos to the legislators on both sides of the house, on both sides of the aisle. They work extraordinarily well. ... They've been strong leaders."

Silver told YNN's "Capital Tonight" last week that "more and more we have a number of men and women where this is their full-time job. And any full-time job where there hasn't been a raise in 14 years, people ought to look at it — if the economy is right."

Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, R-Long Island, said, "Do I feel legislators are adequately paid? No. When you don't have a pay raise for 14 years ... but the circumstances now are you just can't do it."

The circumstances are both economic and political, said Hank Sheinkopf, a political consultant who normally works for Democrats.

"It's not generally a good idea to do in an election year and a recession. No good can come from it," Sheinkopf said.

Lawmakers in Vermont and Michigan recently voted to cut their pay, according to data compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures. A 2011 survey by the NCSL found that the only states where lawmakers make more than they do in New York are California, which pays legislators \$95,290.56 per year, and Pennsylvania, where base pay is \$79,613 per year.

In New York, though, many legislators also earn stipends beyond their base pay for leadership functions, including chairing legislative committees.

Like all things at the Capitol, a pay raise will likely be another chip in a larger game of political poker. In 1999, Gov. George Pataki signed the pay increase after lawmakers granted him authority to open charter schools and agreed to delay their paychecks if the state budget was not passed by its March 31 deadline.

Today, Cuomo's blessing would be key. Polls show close to 70 percent of voters view the governor favorably (compared to roughly 40 percent for members of the Legislature), and a February survey by the Siena Research Institute found 67 percent of those surveyed were opposed a pay increase, compared to 31 percent who were supportive.

It's unclear what Cuomo might demand, or whether legislative acquiescence during the budget process has been enough. And there are no concrete details or amounts of a possible pay increase.

Would a boost in pay be politically sinful? As Sheinkopf puts it, "In the system we have, which is the executive and the legislative, you have to compromise and bob and weave. That's exactly what they're doing — and that's why things are getting done."

Still, don't expect anything to happen quickly with a pay raise, said Siena Poll spokesman Steve Greenberg.

"Traditionally, when the Legislature has done a pay increase it has been done in a lame-duck session, post-election ... so voters will have forgotten about it two years later when they return to the polls," he said.

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