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## Clock ticks on pol hike\$

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Message from the gov: Don't wait 'til next year.

Gov. Cuomo has told associates he's willing to support a desperately desired pay increase for state lawmakers this year, but won't do so next year as his own planned re-election approaches, The Post has learned.

Such a move by Cuomo could mean the Legislature, which hasn't had a raise since 1999, won't be able to get one until 2017, at the earliest.

"If the Legislature wants a pay raise, it's now or never," said a Cuomo administration source.

Administration strategists say the popular governor fears that if he waits beyond this year to approve a pay raise, he could suffer "significant" political damage when he runs for re-election in 2014, as he now plans.

"The governor is willing to do a pay raise, but if it's going to happen it's got to be this year," said the source.

Legislators' pay, traditionally linked to that of the governor, other statewide elected officials and state commissioners, has not been raised since 1999.

Because the state Constitution bars lawmakers from increasing their salaries during their two-year terms in office, a raise this year would take effect Jan. 1, after the elections.

If a pay increase isn't approved this year, a raise couldn't take effect until 2015, at the earliest, the year after the next election for governor.

But with Cuomo unwilling to take the political heat as his bid for re-election approaches, there couldn't be a raise until 2017.

"The governor knows that it's really now or never on the pay raise because if he can't work something out with the Legislature, there's not going to be a pay raise for anybody for a long, long time," said an administration insider.

"It's not as if the governor wants to run for re-election with the memory fresh in voters' minds that he approved pay raises for the Legislature."

Cuomo is believed to be searching for a major Legislature reform that could be achieved in exchange for approving a pay raise — possibly the abolishment of the much-abused, highly lucrative per-diem reimbursement system that gives lawmakers an incentive to remain at the Capitol, doing nothing.

He has publicly complained that the pay for state commissioners is "upside-down," with their deputies — whose salary is automatically increased when raises are granted to unionized workers — making \$20,000 or more a year than their bosses, whose salaries are set by law.

That has prevented the recruitment of some top-flight talent to state government, according to Cuomo.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan) earlier this year endorsed a pay raise for lawmakers, saying, "More and more members are full-time members of the Legislature, and it's significant that their salaries haven't kept pace with inflation for the last 13 years.

"People understand that before there can be a discussion of pay raises, there has to be a change in the performance level of the Legislature," Silver continued.

Cuomo, Silver and Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos (R-Nassau) have been making the case that lawmakers, long identified with Albany dysfunction, have, in fact, improved their performance by passing early budgets two years in a row and by avoiding the bitter partisan bickering that had defined state government for years.

Although they publicly insist no effort is under way to raise their salaries, it was learned that "some delicate talks have taken place" between Cuomo's office and lawmakers" about salary increases.

While many lawmakers, Democratic and Republican, are desperate for a pay raise, they consider even talk of one to be a political "third rail," convinced that opponents could use the issue to beat them in November.

As a result, many privately predict a pay raise will be approved *after* the November balloting.

Lawmakers receive a base salary of \$79,500 a year, but more than 150 of the 212 legislators receive extra payments of as much as \$44,000 annually.

Cuomo's salary is set at \$179,000 a year, but he's returned 5 percent in a belt-tightening gesture.

A Siena College poll being released today is expected to show overwhelming opposition to pay hikes for lawmakers.

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