

Pay raise for NY Legislature possible

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ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — A quiet campaign in Albany has moved the notion of New York legislators getting a pay raise from, "Are you kidding?" to, "Why not?"

Not that any of them is publically calling for a raise to their \$79,500-a-year base pay, which has long been a third rail in Albany and especially during election years like this.

"There have been no discussions about a pay raise," said Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

Late on the last night of the regular session on June 21, perhaps the discipline loosened a bit.

"I'll be back in December to vote on your pay raise!" said Assemblyman Daniel Burling in his farewell address, to wild applause.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and legislative leaders have tried to ignore reporters' questions for months on whether a pay raise is planned for the expected special session in late November or December, after the elections in which all 212 seats in the Legislature are up for grabs.

That's how pay raises have been approved before. Under law, a sitting Legislature can't raise its own pay, but it can do it as late as Dec. 31 and have it effective for what will technically be the next Legislature when it opens the 2013 session in January.

And it usually comes with a political deal. Former Gov. George Pataki, a Republican, approved the last pay raise, but required the Legislature to approve the creation of charter schools, which remains one of his biggest legacies.

Cuomo has several issues he's been unable to get through the Legislature, including the public financing of campaigns. Silver, a fellow Democrat, hasn't been able to raise the minimum wage and Senate Republican Majority Leader Dean Skelos hasn't been able to get tax breaks for employers into law.

"It's very smart strategically," said Doug Muzzio, a political science professor at Baruch College. "Machiavelli says take your cruelties early. So you get the pain over early ... then you have two full years (before the next election)."

Skelos and Cuomo haven't shut the door on pay raises.

Cuomo in radio interviews has noted how difficult it is to get top-shelf talent to work in Albany for the low six-figure pay offered in the executive branch.

That helps legislators, whose pay raises have traditionally been linked to raises of commissioners and other top executive branch employees.

State judges' raises were long tied to legislative raises, but in a separate deal pushed hard by Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, the judiciary received raises of various sizes this year.

Lawmakers have been paid the same \$79,500-a-year base for 13 years, although most make \$10,000 to \$40,000 more in stipends for running committees and filling party jobs such as majority whip. Most also collect about \$170 a day for work in Albany or away from home at public hearings.

Other states' pay for legislators vary widely, from more than \$95,000 a year in California to \$200 for a two-year term with no per diem stipend for session days in New Hampshire.

The governor's base salary is \$179,000 and, as with his commissioners, the pay is set in law until it's raised by the Legislature. Cuomo has noted there are deputy commissioners who are paid more than the commissioner above them.

Such facts, heard more this year after what Cuomo and legislators insist was a "historic" session, are repeated often.

This year, the Siena College found 67 percent of respondents opposed a raise for members of the state Legislature and 74 percent opposed a pay raise for the governor. The question was rarely even asked in past years when the Legislature was held in low regard during a decade marked by gridlock and partisan bickering.

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