

A down payment on justice in N.Y.

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It's not often that we can hail pay raises, and very substantial ones, for public employees in an economy that still reeks of one recession and shows precarious signs of another. But the 27 salary increase that New York's 1,200 or so judges will receive by 2014 represents one of the best ways New York can spend \$50 million.

The public would do well to think of this as a down payment on improving the quality of a judiciary that was a collective victim of unforgivable neglect. Twelve years with no pay raises -- 13 by the time the raises start phasing in next year -- means that, once New York's high cost of living was factored in, judges here were the lowest paid of any state.

To begin to make amends for that ought to bring comfort, of course, to judges who had good reason to leave the once prestigious jobs that no longer paid nearly enough. Between 2012 and 2014 the salary for state Supreme Court judges, for instance, will be gradually raised to \$174,000 a year (up from \$136,700) -- the same that federal judges make now.

That's a fair settlement for a state government that earlier this year was facing a \$10 billion deficit.

Anyone inclined to cry foul at pay raises so large, especially when so many other state employees aren't getting any raises at all, needs to understand that simply adjusting judicial salaries for 12 years worth of inflation would have brought them to \$195,754. It's for that reason, then, that the word from the state Judicial Compensation Commission was greeted by protests from some judges and lawyers that the raises aren't big enough.

The 19 million New Yorkers who have every reason to expect the fair, wise, and quick dispensation of justice should feel their own sense of relief. They were in danger of paying the high, if intangible, price of living in a state where there was scant reason to believe that the judiciary attracted the best and most dedicated legal minds.

Even now, it's worthwhile to look at how New York found itself in this mess, and how it can avoid a repeat of it. It took the Legislature, under heavy pressure, to agree last year to establish the commission on judicial salaries. Doing so ended the years of stalemate when legislators too timid about public outrage to give themselves raises wouldn't give them to judges, either.

It's critical that when another commission takes up the same issue in four years, it sees to it that judges continue to get reasonable raises. More immediately, neither the Legislature nor

Gov. Cuomo should stop this round of raises, as the law allows them to do.

"We live in the real world," says Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, who had hoped for even bigger raises. "We see what's happening in Washington and in our own state. We see what's happening in the stock market."

Indeed. Yet that real world should include adequately paid judges, economic difficulties and all. New York can take solace that it's at least heading in that direction.

THE ISSUE:

New York's judges are about to get long overdue pay raises.

THE STAKES:

Anything else would have been a disservice to both the judges themselves and the people who rely upon their jurisprudence.

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