

Pay raises recommended for judges

Written by

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ALBANY — The state courts system is recommending that judges get a pay raise of up to 62 percent after having their pay frozen since 1999.

The recommendations come in a report this week from chief administrative judge Ann Pfau to the state Commission on Judicial Compensation, which is evaluating the pay of the state's roughly 1,300 judges.

State Supreme Court judges receive a salary of \$136,700. Pfau recommended salaries increase to as high as \$220,836 to put them on par with other states, based on cost of living standards. She recommended a salary between \$192,000 and \$220,836.

Pfau called the recommendations "prudent and responsible." She said New York ranks last in the nation for judicial pay based on cost of living and 20th for actual salary.

"After such a lengthy pay freeze, the cost of the reform of past practices must not prevent this commission from fulfilling its urgent mandate to provide appropriate compensation to New York's judges," she wrote in the report.

The seven-member panel is expected to

release its findings in late August. The commission's recommendations will automatically become law unless state lawmakers try to halt them.

Some Republican lawmakers questioned Pfau's recommendations, saying that while judges may deserve a pay raise it should be within reason.

"The range that Judge Pfau is suggesting seems very generous, especially with middle-class families that are struggling," said Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman John Bonacic, R-Mount Hope, Orange County.

Bonacic said he was hopeful that lawmakers, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the judiciary could work with the commission to find common ground.

Pfau's report said the \$136,700 salary was once on par with U.S. District Court salaries, but that federal judges have seen a 27.3 percent raise since 1999, to \$174,000, while state judges have seen zero.

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The commission was established last year to evaluate every four years how much the state judges should be paid. Judicial pay has traditionally been tied to salary increases for the state Legislature, which also hasn't had a raise above the \$79,500 base salary since 1999.

Courts say they are dealing with a record number of cases, while state law bars them from hiring more judges.

To offset the lack of pay raises, New York judges receive \$10,000 yearly expense allowances. The stipend was instituted in 2008 and doubled to \$10,000 a year later, costing taxpayers about \$12.4 million a year.

The courts have argued that it is hard to attract and retain qualified judges because of the pay scale.

But Assemblyman Sean Hanna, R-Mendon, said there were plenty of lawyers in upstate New York who want to serve as judges for the current pay.

"In upstate New York, when a judicial position opens there is a line wrapping around the block of very qualified attorneys champing at the bit to be named to the position or elected to the position," said Hanna, a lawyer who serves on the Assembly Judiciary Committee.

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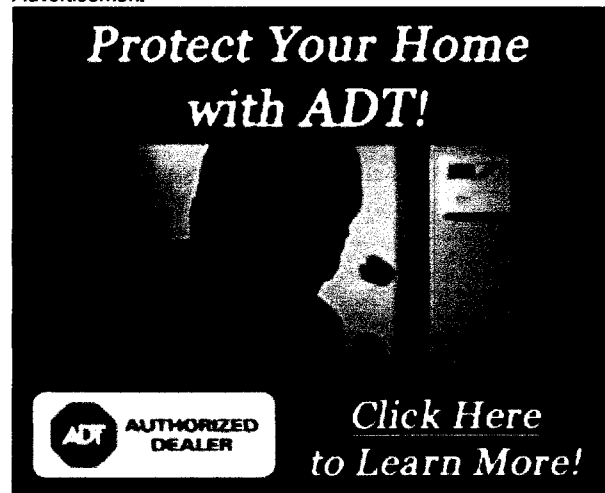
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