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New York judge-pay commission gets underway

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NEW YORK, July 11 (Reuters) - Members of the commission charged with setting the pay for New York state judges met for the first time Monday and some expressed confidence that they would increase salaries that have remained unchanged since 1999.

"I cannot envision this process ending with anything less than an immediate raise," said commissioner Mark Mulholland. "I am certainly going to aim for that result myself."

The clock started ticking on April 1 for the Special Commission on Judicial Compensation, a seven-member panel established in 2010 by former Gov. David Paterson. The commission's deadline is Aug. 28, but it could not begin its work until recently, when Gov. Andrew Cuomo made the final three appointments. At Monday's meeting, held at the offices of the Empire State Development Corporation in midtown Manhattan, commission chairman Bill Thompson acknowledged the shortened time frame.

"We don't want to go to the end of August and race a deadline," Thompson said.

Members of the public could RSVP to attend, or follow along by calling in or watching a webcast. The commission's next session will be a public hearing in Albany on July 20, followed by two more meetings in August.

The commission has already received a report from a coalition of state judicial associations calling for a 41-percent hike and a submission by Chief Administrative Judge Ann Pfau on behalf of the state judiciary.

Commissioner Kathryn Wyld explained after the meeting that the lack of a raise since 1999 is due to the fact that judicial pay has been tied to legislative salary increases.

"The judges have essentially been the victims of the turf battles between the governor and the legislature. This is the first time when the judicial salaries are not being hung up by that process," she said.

NOT WORKING IN A VACUUM

As they considered what other materials they will need, Commissioner Bill Mulrow noted that the commission is not considering the judges' request in a vacuum. "We have to do this in the context of the state's financial picture," he said.

But Mulholland said he believes New York needs superb judges, and immediate raises will be necessary.

Commissioner Robert Fiske Jr. said the question is, "How does New York value its judiciary?"

While the commission did not discuss any specific figures, Thompson suggested that the members focus on the salary for a Supreme Court justice and apply the appropriate ratio to the other judges. Supreme Court justices currently earn \$136,700 a year.

Brooklyn Family Court Judge Daniel Turbow attended the meeting and said the commission appears to be off to "a very good start."

"I think that it's fairly clear they're going to recommend a raise. I think they were fairly understanding of the impact the failure to give a raise for many years has had on the individual judges and the judiciary as a whole."

The commission's recommendation will be binding, unless modified or repealed by statute.

(Reporting by Jennifer Golson)

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