

Raises proposed for governor, other statewide elected officials; Pay scale would take effect for next term Times-Picayune (New Orleans) May 2, 2007 Wednesday

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HEADLINE: Raises proposed for governor, other statewide elected officials;
Pay scale would take effect for next term

BYLINE: By Ed Anderson, Capital bureau

BODY:

BATON ROUGE -- Louisiana's future governors would be paid \$130,000 a year and the six other statewide-elected officials would be paid \$115,000 annually under a bill filed by Rep. Joseph Toomy, R-Gretna, and House Speaker Joe Salter, D-Florien.

House Bill 489 would boost the governor's salary by \$35,000 a year and would give the other officials a pay raise of \$30,000. If passed, the bill would go into effect with the start of the new terms of statewide officials and the new governor Jan. 14.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who said a month ago she will not seek re-election, opposed giving pay raises to state officials when the issue cropped up in 2004, saying the Legislature should focus on improving pay of teachers and state employees. State workers, teachers and school support workers are targeted for pay raises in Blanco's budget this year.

Blanco was less definitive about opposing or backing a pay raise this year. "The governor has not made a decision on this matter," her chief spokeswoman, Marie Centanni, said Tuesday. "She will monitor the bill's progress."

Recommended by panel

The new salaries were recommended by the Compensation Review Commission, a panel of former lawmakers and private citizens named by the House, Senate and other elected state officials, in its 2006 report.

The Legislature has ignored its findings recommending pay increases in the past, prompting the commission to urge lawmakers to implement the findings or dismantle the panel.

"I think it (the bill) has legs," said Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom, who has pushed a pay raise for statewide officials for years. Odom, the senior-most statewide official, said if teachers and state workers are in line for pay raises, the elected officials should also get pay increases.

"Making it effective with the next administration makes it more palatable," Odom said.

The last pay raise for the statewide officials came in 1995, Toomy said.

He pointed out that the pay of judges will increase again July 1 because of a bill he handled for them raising salaries over two years. District court judges will be paid \$118,200 per year as of July 1, while the associate justices of the state Supreme Court will receive \$130,988 and the chief justice will get \$137,447.

Other officials also have bills pending at the session seeking pay raises, including for assessors and clerks of court, Toomy said.

'The best time'

He said there are about 2,000 employees of various state agencies that make at least \$100,000 a year, more than the governor and statewide elected officials. In some cases, he said, local officials make more than statewide officials.

"It doesn't seem to make sense for a local official to be elected to a statewide office and take a cut in pay," Toomy said. "There is never a good time (to raise the pay of political officials), but this would be the best time" since the pay increases will not go into effect until the next administration. "These officials are on the low side of being out of line" with their counterparts in other states, he said.

At \$95,000 a year, Blanco is among the lowest paid governors in the South, tied with the governor of West Virginia. Only two others are below that level: the governor of Tennessee, who is paid \$85,000; and the governor of Arkansas, who makes \$77,028, based on 2006 figures.

If the pay for the next governor is raised to \$135,000, Louisiana would be near the top in pay, with only Maryland paying more at \$150,000.

Toomy's bill has been assigned to the House Committee on House and Governmental Affairs for a hearing, but no date has been set.

Emily Sneed, a spokeswoman for Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, said the pay raise bill "is not on our radar," although Landrieu in the past has supported "reasonable increases for state employees and state officials."

Insurance Commissioner Jim Donelon and Secretary of State **Jay Dardenne**, the two Republican statewide elected officials, said they would take the **pay raises** if passed.

"I am not doing anything to support the bill," Dardenne said.

"I am not lobbying for the bill or against the bill," Donelon said. "That is the Legislature's prerogative."

Neither Attorney General Charles Foti nor Treasurer John Kennedy responded to requests for comment on the Toomy bill.

Senate increase proposed

Meanwhile, the Senate Committee on Senate and Governmental Affairs has been assigned Senate Bill 295 by Sen. Derrick Shepherd, D-Marrero, giving senators and their legislative assistants pay raises but not House members or their staffs.

The bill would keep House members' pay at \$16,800 a year but more than double the pay of senators from \$16,800 a year to \$45,360. It also would bump the pay of the Senate president from \$32,000 a year to \$86,400 and the salary of the Senate president pro tem from \$24,500 to \$66,450.

It also would increase the base pay of legislative assistants hired by senators from a maximum of \$2,000 a month to a maximum \$5,400 a month and the maximum pay of aides from \$3,000 a month to \$8,100 a month.