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## Special state commission should vote New York's judges a long-overdue raise -- but a reasonable one

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BY DAILY NEWS STAFF  
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Thursday, August 25, 2011

A special commission will meet Friday to vote on a raise for the state's judges, which would be the first hike the jurists have received since 1999 - unless the vote is overturned by the Legislature and the governor.

At a time when governments are laying off workers and public employee unions are signing contracts that include zero in pay increases - along with givebacks - the panel should act modestly.

New York's judges have long had a fair complaint about being denied raises by a Legislature that hadn't the nerve to raise its own salary and that forced the courts to swallow the same bitter medicine.



A special commission deciding state judges' pay raises should increase... (Marc Hermann for News)

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Eleven years of inflation have taken a big toll on judicial standards of living. A state Supreme Court justice today is paid \$136,700, far less than the starting salary of a newbie lawyer at a top firm.

Obviously, a boost is in order. But how much? The seven-member panel, chaired by former city Controller Bill Thompson, should use as as starting point for its calculations the \$174,000 annual pay of federal judges.

The commission should knock several grand off that figure in recognition of the higher caliber and higher standing of U.S. judges and offer best wishes for enjoying fatter paychecks to the state judiciary.

Of course, the judges have grander ambitions. They would start at \$174,000 and work their way up to \$195,754 or even to \$220,836, using made-up benchmarks.

Should the panel leap into such a stratosphere, the Legislature and Gov. Cuomo would be well within their rights to kill the action and to require judges to live in the cold, hard world occupied by their fellow civil servants.

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## Judge them in open court: Legislature should open Commission on Judicial Conduct proceedings to view

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BY EDITORIALS  
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Monday, February 07, 2011

Some New York judges seem to believe they don't get a fair shake from the agency that polices their actions on the bench. There is one way to find out for sure:

The Legislature should open Commission on Judicial Conduct proceedings to view. All its hearings should be public once the panel has found grounds to vote charges against a judge.

The commission supports openness, as does every court-watching organization in the state. Only the judges balk at lifting the secrecy that bars the panel from releasing any information except a final order of discipline.



It's time to open New York judges' hearings to the public. (Getty)

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Despite this protection, judges complained that the commission has too much power to act against them. They got the ear of the New York County Lawyers Association, which in turn got the attention of the state bar association.

Ever friendly to its judicial brethren, the association is asking Albany to give judges consideration beyond the wildest dreams of due process.

Its proposals include requiring the commission to give judges early notice of probes, as well as almost full access to the work of investigators. The group also calls for limits on the panel's power to expand probes and for taxpayers to bankroll expenses judges incur in defending themselves.

These are not worth a moment's thought. But opening the process to sunlight after the commission has filed charges - a step ignored by the association - would enhance confidence that judges and the public alike are being treated justly.

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## Ethics victory? Not yet, Gov: Andrew Cuomo has a long road ahead before ethical reform comes true

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BY BILL HAMMOND  
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER  
Tuesday, June 07, 2011

You used the H-word yesterday, Gov. Cuomo. You called your long-awaited ethics deal with the Legislature "historic."

"We talk about cleaning up Albany," you declared. "This bill is actually going to do it."

Those are bold words, governor. They're music to the ears of New Yorkers fed up with their sleazy, dysfunctional state government.

Now it's up to you to make sure they come true.

Getting a balky Legislature to pass the bill - imperfect as it is - will be a significant feather in your cap. Another major accomplishment. Another promise kept.



Gov. Andrew Cuomo > (DeCelle/Pool)

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Working to your advantage will be the reform breakthroughs that you won at the bargaining table.

First and foremost, members of the Legislature will finally have to come clean about their outside income. They'll have to tell the public how much they earn from their moonlighting and name the names of clients doing business with the state.

This marks a huge improvement over the status quo, in which lawmakers can take money from pretty much anyone they want and keep it on the q.t.

The so-called financial disclosures they file now are jokes. The politicians give only the vaguest idea of who's paying them and how much - and all the dollar amounts are literally whited out before those documents are shared with the public. Even so, legislators were infamously advised to deliver the forms by hand so as to avoid prosecution for mail fraud if they were ever caught in a lie.

One legislator after another has exploited this shadowy system to get away with soliciting bribes thinly disguised as consulting fees.

And among those still hiding details of their employment are the two most powerful men in the Legislature - Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos (R-L.I.) and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan), who both practice law on the side.

Skelos and Silver deny any conflict between this private work and their public duty. If your bill does what you say it will do, Governor, the public will finally be able to judge for itself.

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**While Budget Fight Rages, Spitzer Ducks**

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BY BILL HAMMOND  
Tuesday, April 25, 2006

ALBANY - Eliot Spitzer boasts in his latest TV ad about his willingness "to walk into the buzz saw of some very powerful interests" - which is a fair enough statement about his record on Wall Street.

But the budget battle between Gov. Pataki and the Legislature is one buzz saw that Spitzer is carefully avoiding.

It's a classic "High Noon" showdown pitting Sheriff Pataki, the lonely fiscal conservative, against a gang of money-hungry lawmakers and interest groups. Pataki needs all the backup he can get to protect taxpayers from a shakedown. But Spitzer, the Democrat most likely to wear the star next year, is making himself scarce.

"We don't get to vote on an override, nor do we get to veto," says Spitzer spokesman Paul Larrabee. "That is clearly the domain of the governor and the Legislature."

At a Citizens Budget Commission meeting this month, Spitzer ripped the Legislature for spending too much and urged Pataki to wield his veto. But now that Pataki has done so 208 times, knocking out \$3 billion in spending, Spitzer is clamming up.

With a few exceptions - relating to clean-energy money and pork barrel slush funds - Spitzer takes no position on whether lawmakers should override Pataki's vetoes, as the Assembly started to do yesterday.

"We have not studied all of them," Larrabee said of the vetoes. "Many of them may be sound, while there may be others that merit override consideration."

Other candidates for governor aren't so shy. Republican John Faso and Democrat Tom Suozzi have lined up with Pataki.

"The Legislature spent, borrowed and taxed too much," Faso said. "I would vote to sustain the vetoes."

Suozzi charges that Spitzer is unwilling to buck powerful Democrats in the Legislature who have endorsed him, such as Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

"What good is his support from the establishment if he can't get them to do some of the reforms he wants?" said Suozzi.

It's not as if Spitzer is powerless. Silver would return his phone calls. And Spitzer's running mate, Senate Minority Leader David Paterson, has a lot to say about whether Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno can muster the votes for an override.

With his commanding lead in the polls, Spitzer undoubtedly calculates that it's not worth the risk to take a strong stand. Siding with the Legislature would make him look like a patsy of the special interests, while siding with Pataki would earn their wrath.

But staying quiet has its risks, too. He's leaving voters in the dark about his reflexes on taxes and spending. And he's weakening his reputation as a champion of the little guy who's not afraid of that special interest buzz saw. [whammond@nydailynews.com](mailto:whammond@nydailynews.com)

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