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“Cafeteria” benefit plan considered by UC compensation review committee

KINGSTON – Members of the Ulster County Legislature, who haven’t had a pay raise since 2001, may be getting a shot in the arm next year, with an increase in benefits. The Periodic Committee on Compensation Review, which convenes every two years, is poised to offer county officials increased compensation.

Intense discussion took place Monday night in Kingston, as the review committee discussed the fairness of raising pay in a troubled economic climate. No action was taken due to the absence of a fifth member, but a final decision may be hammered out by the next meeting.

Their deadline for recommendation is the end of September.

Newly appointed committee member Gerald Benjamin, a former legislative chairman and SUNY New Paltz think-tank director, suggested a modified “Cafeteria” style benefit increase, where legislators would receive \$2,500 extra, in addition to the base \$10,000 salary, to be used for health benefits, or simply pocketed if so desired.

The county health plan, while costing a maximum of \$2,500, is worth up to \$28,000 in medical services. About 20 percent of legislators opt out of the plan.

“I invented it out of my head in 10 seconds; it’s a way of being a little more fair,” Benjamin explained, noting a drop in unemployment rates.

Committee member and former Shandaken supervisor Wayne Gutmann disputed the labor statistics.

“I’m a great guy for the sniff test; how do things smell out there,” Gutmann said. “When you get out there, go to restaurants, shopping aisle, things are not good,” he said.

Benjamin agreed, adding that while some choices of the committee might not be popular, it’s still the choice they have to make.

“When we talk about proper, what’s proper?” Gutmann countered. “Am I going to go out there and ask that guy working his ass off in a garage, doesn’t have medical insurance or anything, I need a few more bucks from you this year because my county executive, he needs some more money. Someone’s got to pay for it. People are desperate.”

Committee member Brian Cahill noted that the value of the base \$10,000 has decreased by 33 percent since 2001.

“People aren’t living on that,” concurred Chairman Glenn Noonan, a former legislator.

Much discussion went back and forth about the balance between offering decent compensation to attract good public officials, versus offering too much and getting poorly performing officials only concerned with their own benefit.

Salaries for county executive, sheriff, county clerk, and comptroller were tabled until the next meeting. The committee is leaning towards not raising those salaries, despite excellent performance, instead basing the pay on the size of the county and responsibilities with those positions.

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