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Ulster County pay committee debates proposed raises for elected leaders

By Mid-Hudson News Network and Freeman staff

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KINGSTON >> A former chairman of the Ulster County Legislature has recommended paying county lawmakers an extra \$2,500 per year that could be used to defer their health insurance costs or simply be pocketed.

Gerald Benjamin made the suggestions at Monday night's meeting of the county's Periodic Compensation Review Committee, to which he was recently appointed.

The meeting included a sometimes-intense discussion of whether county lawmakers should be given raises amid a sluggish economy. Their last raise was in 2001.

No action was taken Monday due to the absence of a fifth member of the committee, but a final decision may be hammered out by the next meeting. Their deadline for a recommendation is the end of September.

Rank-and-file Ulster County legislators are paid \$10,000 annually. The majority and minority leader each receive \$12,000 annually, and the chairman is paid \$19,500. All of the positions are considered part-time jobs.

Legislators David Donaldson, D-Kingston, and Ken Ronk, R-Walkill, last month [proposed raising the salaries of all lawmakers by \\$4,000 per year](#), bringing the total base salary to \$14,000. In addition to that increase, the two proposed adding an additional \$1,000 to pay of majority and minority leaders, which would bring the annual salary to \$17,000. The chairman's salary would increase by \$1,500 to \$25,000.

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

Benjamin, who led the Legislature 25 years ago and now heads a think tank at SUNY New Paltz, said of his \$2,500 plan: "I invented it out of my head in 10 seconds. It's a way of being a little more fair."

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

Wayne Gutmann, a member of the compensation committee and a former Shandaken town supervisor, said the current economic climate runs counter to proposed raises for legislators.

"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."

Possible raises for the county executive, sheriff, clerk and comptroller were tabled until the committee's next meeting, but the members appeared to be leaning toward not raising those salaries.

"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?" Gutmann said. "Someone's got to pay for it. People are desperate."

In Dutchess County, rank-and-file legislators are paid \$15,400, the majority and minority leaders are paid \$23,690 each, assistant leaders are paid \$19,570, and the chairman is paid \$32,960.

In Greene County, rank-and-file legislators are paid \$15,000, the majority and minority leaders receive \$16,000 each, and the chairman is paid \$21,750.

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