

State House aides get raises

Human services workers protest

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Legislative leaders quietly handed out pay raises to their staff last week, despite a looming budget crunch that has prompted Governor Deval Patrick to freeze pay raises for low-wage human services workers and weigh a new round of spending cuts.

House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo granted 3 percent raises to all 460 House employees for a total cost of \$764,000, and Senate President Therese Murray gave 3 percent raises to a small handful of her direct staff. Those salary increases followed a 3 percent bump that Patrick gave to hundreds of non-union managers in July at a total cost of \$10 million.

The latest raises — which the speaker and Senate president can grant at their own discretion — immediately stirred outrage among human services workers who were told by the governor just last month that their 2 percent raises had been frozen because of dwindling tax revenues and a potential shortfall in the state budget.

The 29,000 workers, who care for the homeless and developmentally disabled, had already begun to protest at the State House on Monday when they learned that legislative staff members had been granted the 3 percent hike.

The workers earn \$25,000 a year, on average, and have gone without an increase since 2008.

“There’s no sense of a shared sacrifice here,” said Michael D. Weekes, president and chief executive of the Providers’ Council, which advocates for the workers. “Why are the lowest-paid people taking it on the chin?”

DeLeo, a Winthrop Democrat, defended the pay hikes for House staff members, saying they had not seen an increase since September 2008.

His office said the raises amount to 2 percent of the overall House budget, and no additional money will be needed to fund them.

Salaries for House employees range from \$33,000 for legislative aides to \$125,000 for the chamber’s chief lawyer, with the bulk of employees earning between \$33,000 and \$42,00 a year.

“When you consider that it’s been at least four years, and you’re talking about a 3 percent raise, something had to be done,” DeLeo said. “A lot of these folks are having

difficulty that I hear from them and the reps paying their own bills now. So I consider it something we needed to do so they could continue to exist themselves.”

DeLeo said the House has cut expenses and has trimmed its workforce to 460, down from 546 when he took over in January 2009. “So I don’t consider a 3 percent raise to be unreasonable,” he said.

The money, he said, will come from the existing \$35 million House budget, which has increased in recent years.

Murray’s office said she granted the 3 percent raise to staff members who work directly under her, although a spokesman refused to provide an exact number or a total cost. Individual senators can decide on their own whether to give their aides similar raises, Murray spokesman David Falcone said, adding that he was not sure which senators, if any, had done so.

Murray and DeLeo handed out the raises despite a worsening fiscal picture that has prompted Patrick to curtail state hiring and begin preparing spending cuts that may be necessary to balance the budget.

Recent tax collections have been unexpectedly weak, failing to measure up to last year’s levels. In October, revenues were \$162 million short of budgetary estimates and \$48 million below the level in October 2011.

State revenues are now \$256 million behind budget and \$33 million behind last year’s collections. As a result, Patrick has asked agency heads to start identifying potential cuts and has imposed constraints on discretionary spending.

The \$20 million salary reserve for human services workers was among those spending items that the governor froze in anticipation of potential cuts. Patrick does not have authority over the pay raises for legislative staff.

On Monday, he said he was waiting to see what this month’s tax collections look like before deciding whether to release the salary money for human services workers.

“We have all kinds of steps we’ve taken in anticipation of potential budget cuts, because revenue has slowed down, but we haven’t made any final decisions,” Patrick told reporters.

Motioning toward a group of direct-care workers who were gathered outside his office, protesting in matching yellow T-shirts, Patrick said: “We appreciate that you are here, but those decision aren’t made. This is, I think, a preemptive expression of concern.”

Ann Sinawski, 54, who lives in Quincy and works at a Mattapan group home, was among those protesting the freezing of the salary money.

Sinawski said she earns \$11.06 an hour to shower, feed, and care for four developmentally disabled women – “making sure, basically, that they’re happy and safe.”

But she said she has had to go to a food pantry for her own meals and she struggles to pay bills. “I have a very understanding landlord who lets me slide an extra week on the rent,” she said. “If I didn’t have that, I would have been evicted.”

Pay raises have not been uncommon on Beacon Hill, even during a time of budgetary worry. The 3 percent raise that Patrick gave managers in July came on top of a 3 percent bump in July 2011, when union workers received their own 3-percent increase.

Before that, managers had not gotten a pay increase since 2008, and many were forced to take furloughs in 2009 and 2010.

Auditor Suzanne M. Bump gave out raises of as much as 16 percent to her staff in June 2011.

Bump said at the time that a study she commissioned found that her employees earn less on average than workers in comparable positions in government and private offices. Those raises cost \$517,186 out of her office’s existing budget, she said.