



August 3, 2008

How would you save the state money?

Pension changes, layoffs considered

*By Jenny Lee
Poughkeepsie Journal*

Local residents and state legislators want to see changes to state employees' pensions and benefits, some job cuts or salary cuts and other solutions.

Gov. David Paterson said recently the state faces a \$6.4 billion budget shortfall in the upcoming fiscal year. Over the next three years, the state could face a \$26.2 billion budget gap.

State pensions seem to be high on some people's lists on how the state can save money.

Ruth Detjen, of the Town of Poughkeepsie, said, "The state should offer incentives to retire for employees with 25 or more years of service. They could sweeten the pot a little by offering extra years of credit (say one or two years) if an employee agrees to retire within a certain time frame.

"The retirement incentives should be offered in every department across the state," Detjen said. "Younger, less expensive employees could be hired, or, depending on the position, the job could be left vacant. This should be done as soon as possible."

Jim Shuttleworth, of La-Grange, said he believes state employees have far better pension plans than their private counterparts.

"I do feel strongly we need to rein in the unions," Shuttleworth said. "Public unions need to factor in what taxpayers can pay, New York's financial state, and taxpayers' unease at funding the extremely generous pensions pay and benefits that they themselves cannot have and never will."

Frank Somers, of Hopewell Junction, said the state doesn't need to cut jobs. Rather, the state could cut salaries, and keep employees working.

"The minute you start laying off people, [they've] got to start looking for jobs," Somers said.

Assemblyman Joel Miller, R-Poughkeepsie, had a different opinion about job cuts.

Top state employees should be laid off, and not those at the bottom with the lowest salaries, Miller said.

But across-the-board cuts could be critical for some departments.

For example, if the state cuts people in long-term care facilities, doing so could affect care and the statutory and constitutional overtime laws, said Gerald Benjamin, SUNY New Paltz director of the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, and associate vice president for regional engagement.

Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, R-Tivoli, believes the financial problems the state faces are systemic. State lawmakers and officials need to change their mindset, he said.

"It's the mentality," Molinaro said. "It's about looking at the way we deliver services."

Assemblyman Kevin Cahill, D-Kingston, wants to make sure the state still gives the same aid to

municipalities.

"I would stand firm against any cuts to local assistance to our school districts and to our counties and other municipalities since their budgets are in place and they're depending upon that money," he said.

"It would merely be passing along tax increases onto the taxpayer," Cahill said. "Other than that, there's reason to believe pretty much everything else is up for grabs."
