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Commission Raises N.Y. Judges' Pay 27% Over 3 Years

By WILLIAM GLABERSON

A state commission on Friday decided to increase the pay of the more 1,200 New York State judges by 27 percent over three years, after 12 years without a raise.

The seven-member commission, which was appointed by the leaders of the three branches of state government, had been expected to grant a raise to the judges, but the amount they settled on was considered very modest and some judges expressed bitter disappointment.

The commission voted to 4 to 3 to approve the increase with members sharply divided amid accusations of political grandstanding.

The commission was created under a bill passed last year to try to resolve one of the most contentious and long-stalled issues in Albany. "This is a start at correcting the injustice that has been done to New York State's judiciary over more than a decade of neglect," said the commission's chairman, William Thompson Jr., the former New York City comptroller.

But Mr. Thompson and other members of the commission also said that the fragile state economy required restraint. Under the commission's decision, the highest level of trial judges in the state, the justices of the State Supreme Court, would receive an increase to \$174,000 from the current \$136,700, phased in over three years. That would match the salary of United States District Court judges.

Over years of political struggles and court cases on the judicial-pay issue, New York's judges, once among the best paid nationally had slipped to being among the worst paid. The increase was small compared with some proposals that had called for judicial raises across the court system of 60 percent or more.

Under legislation passed last year, the creation of the commission was an effort to get raises for the judges while minimizing political fallout from what was likely to be an unpopular decision in a time of budget cutbacks.

The raises will go into effect next spring unless they are specifically overruled by legislation passed by both houses of the State Legislature and signed by the governor. Mr. Thompson said

he hoped the modest level of the increase would dissuade the Legislature and the governor from seeking to overturn the decision, which he said would be “disastrous” for the judiciary.

The commission’s decision would govern judicial pay for four years, after which another commission would revisit the issue. The pay increase would apply to judges from low-level courts like New York City civil and criminal court judges to the members of the state’s highest court, the Court of Appeals.

The salary of Supreme Court justices had been viewed as a benchmark, with the commission agreeing to keep in place the relative differences in pay across a complex state court system with many different pay levels.

The salary of judges in criminal courts, who earn \$125,600, would also increase proportionally over the next three years.

Judges argued that the pay stagnation meant that some judges were leaving the bench and that qualified lawyers were not seeking judicial positions. But the Cuomo administration had told the commission to exercise caution in deciding the size of any raise because of the state’s troubled financial condition.

Three of the commission members were appointed by the governor, two by the state’s chief judge and two by legislative leaders.