

Unchecked state Salary Commission must be abolished

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Washington state lawmakers got another pay raise, which will boost their salary about 17 percent (more than \$8,000 a year) over the next two years from the current \$48,731 a year to \$56,881. Do they deserve the higher pay? Perhaps.

How many voters are getting a 17 percent raise over the next two years? Very, very few.

Unfortunately, it's really not the public's business what lawmakers and other state officials are paid since voters in 1986 took politics — and essentially themselves — out of the process. Voters approved a change to the state constitution that established the Washington Citizens' Commission on Salaries for Elected Officials.

As a result, the Commission has no public oversight over its decisions.

Voters made a dumb decision 30 years ago and it haunts us today. Certainly something needs to be done.

Ultimately, we believe the power to set salaries should be with the Legislature. The Legislature should set the salaries for its members' next term in office as well as those of other elected officials. In order to receive that salary, they and the other officials must face the voters.

And if the voters are not happy with the pay for their elected officials, they can vote the lawmakers who established the salaries out of office. The threat of a voter backlash would likely be enough to bring thoughtful debate to the process. It's a check on the salary scale getting out of control.

As it is now, the salaries have been on a sharp trajectory upward following the Great Recession.

In its latest round of salary increases, the 17-member Commission included an annual cost-of-living adjustments for all those positions of 2 percent in 2019 and another 2 percent in 2020.

The Commission's members are chosen randomly in a drawing in which one voter from each of the 10 congressional districts is picked. The remaining seven members are selected from representatives of labor, higher education, business, personnel management and attorneys by the speaker of the House and the Senate president. The Commission holds the sole authority to set pay and it can't reduce elected officials' salaries.

All statewide elected officials as well as judges got pay hikes too.

For example, Gov. Jay Inslee, Attorney General Bob Ferguson and Treasurer Duane Davidson will get \$1,500 raises in 2019 and another \$1,500 in 2020, The Seattle Times reported. This means the governor's will be \$187,353 by 2020, attorney general \$172,259 and treasurer \$153,615.

Now, to be fair, these salaries don't seem outrageously high for the responsibility of the office. Again, the new salaries might be appropriate but it just feels wrong that they are set without public oversight.

The Commission system should go away.

Editorials are the opinion of the Union-Bulletin's Editorial Board. The board is composed of Brian Hunt, Rick Eskil, James Blethen and Alasdair Stewart

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