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 - [Letters](#)
 - [Roundtable](#)
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 - [Mark Paul](#)
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Editorial: More pension bloat?

Davis, lawmakers should call a halt

Bee Editorial Staff

Published 2:15 a.m. PDT Thursday, June 19, 2003

By now, you know that local governments are facing a long-term crisis as pension costs for public employees soar. You probably aren't aware that another retirement giveaway to already lavishly pensioned firefighters and police is sailing through the Legislature.

Meet AB 80, by Assemblyman Russ Bogh, a Southern California Republican. His bill would allow firefighters and cops in 20 of California's largest counties, Sacramento among them, to purchase up to 10 years of extra credit for service performed in fire and police departments outside California.

It works like this: If you're a firefighter with San Joaquin County or a deputy at the Sacramento Sheriff's Department who previously served five years in law enforcement or firefighting out of state, under the Bogh bill you can tack that five years onto your service record in

Sacramento to boost retirement pay here.

The firefighter or deputy who takes advantage of this buy-in plan would have to pay the employee share of the retirement costs plus interest, but that's pennies compared to what the employer -- county taxpayers -- would be obligated to pay.

San Joaquin County calculated the costs incurred if just one of its safety workers took advantage of the Bogh bill to buy back five years of extra service credit. The employee would pay \$15,552; the county would pay \$105,534. If the employee bought back 10 years, those costs would double. The bill also would permit those counties or fire districts that vote to approve this extra benefit to pay the entire costs, both the employer and employee shares.

The California Professional Firefighters, the powerful union sponsoring the Bogh bill, claims that taxpayers' additional costs financed over 20 or 30 years are negligible. Huh? No additional costs to county governments already struggling to pay for recent expensive increases to retirement benefits can be considered negligible. And in fact, neither the union nor local officials know how many firefighters and police officers are eligible to take advantage of the buy-in option or what taxpayers ultimately would be obligated to pay.

Most firefighters and sheriff's deputies in the counties covered by the Bogh bill are eligible to retire at age 50, with up to 100 percent of their pay right now. How much more can they want? How much more can beleaguered taxpayers and nearly bankrupt local governments afford to pay?

Enough. Until state and local governments know what the fiscal impact will be of pension benefits already approved, Gov. Gray Davis and legislative leaders of both parties should declare a moratorium on any more pension bills. Let's gain at least some control on the bleeding before opening up another vein.



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