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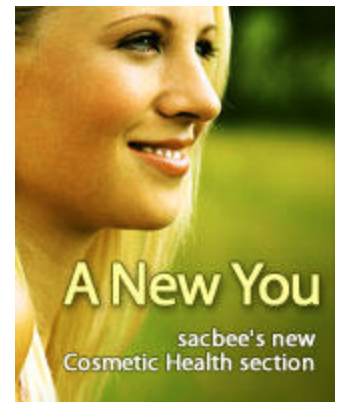


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Editorial: Beyond outrageous Unions back at pension trough

Published 2:15 am PDT Tuesday, May 31, 2005

Last Wednesday, thousands of public employee union members flexed their considerable political muscle in a rally at the Capitol. While the TV cameras focused on the demonstrators outside, inside the Capitol leaders of the elite unions, the ones that represent firefighters and police, pushed legislation to add even more generous benefits to already lavish pensions.

Never mind that cities and counties already face budget-breaking retirement costs. Voting along straight party lines - Democrats for and Republicans against - members of the Assembly Public Sector Committee approved a series of new measures to fatten already bloated police and fire pensions. These bills are fiscal time bombs. They fleece taxpayers, while pushing state and local governments ever closer to insolvency.



Consider ABX1 6 by rookie Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa. It is one of the worst. The bill would raise the cap on retirement benefits from 90 percent to 100 percent of pay for firefighters and police officers enrolled in the California Public Employee Retirement System. (Police and firefighters employed by the 20 so-called 37 Act counties, Sacramento among them, belong to a separate public pension system that already entitles members to receive 100 percent of their pay in pensions.)

Taxpayers and lawmakers should be clear about this: If the Evans bill becomes law, it will mean that nearly all police officers and firefighters in this state will be able to retire in their early 50s with 100 percent of pay.

And it gets worse. Despite documented evidence of widespread abuses in the disability retirement system for police and firefighters, Evans' bill would expand that benefit, too. Today, police and firefighters who claim a disability can retire with 50 percent of their pensions tax-free. ABX1 6 would allow them to collect 85 percent of their pension tax-free. That simply encourages more disability retirements.

Local government officials who testified against this particular provision of the Evans bill called the costs "staggering." Police and firefighters who took advantage of the new disability benefits would "net greater take-home pay than actual salary."

There's more. The bill would change the definition of final compensation for all employees, not just police and firefighters, in a way that could substantially increase costs. Under this bill, some overtime hours could be considered final compensation for the purpose of calculating pensions. The potential costs of such a change are incalculable. As a final insult to taxpayers, employers who pay the employees' share of retirement costs, a common provision in government employee contracts, could have that payment included in pension calculations as well.

ABX1 6 would bestow huge new potential benefits at a time the state, counties and cities are borrowing money to pay current retirement costs. It is likely to create billions more in new liability, with no new revenue sources to pay for it.

Pick your adjective: This measure is irresponsible, unconscionable, shameless, craven. Such words might be useful if you call the legislators who voted for it. Their phone numbers are listed below:

Alberto Torrico, 319-2020

Noreen Evans, 319-2007

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