GAMBIT WEEKLY

An Unpopular Cause

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State Sen. Ann Duplessis of New Orleans touched off a firestorm last week when she introduced a measure to boost Louisiana legislators' annual salaries to $70,000 a year from the current $16,800 — an increase of more than 400 percent. In almost every case, voters' and commentators' responses were something along the order of "Not this bunch," or "They knew what the job paid when they ran for it." All of which is true, but we still think an arm's length review of legislative salaries is a good exercise. Nationwide, legislators' pay varies widely, usually in relation to the workload. Eleven states have "professional" legislatures that require lawmakers to spend at least 80 percent of their time on official business. Such lawmakers typically earn something akin to a full-time salary. According to data from the National Council of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org), the highest-paid lawmakers are those in California. They earn more than $116,000 a year in salary plus $170 a day in "per diem" for each day they are in session. On the other end of the spectrum, 17 states have "citizen" legislatures, which require no more than 50 percent of a typical lawmaker's time. As you might expect, salaries for those legislators are pretty low. New Mexico pays its lawmakers no salary at all, just a per diem of $144 a day; Alabama pays only $10 a day in salary, but it adds nearly $4,000 a month in per diem to that amount.
Louisiana and 21 other states have "hybrid" legislatures that fall somewhere between those two extremes. Such legislatures typically require about two-thirds of a lawmaker's time, according to the Public Affairs Research Council (PAR), a non-partisan public policy group based in Baton Rouge (www.la-par.org). Legislative pay in most "hybrid" states, including Louisiana, is higher than in states with "citizen" legislatures but far short of the full-time pay offered in some of the bigger states.

But salaries alone should not be the only benchmark, because some states (including Louisiana) compensate lawmakers in several ways. For example, Texas pays its legislators an official salary of only $7,200 a year — but legislators there get a huge office allowance, out of which they can (and usually do) boost their pay significantly. Moreover, Texas lawmakers can vest in a state retirement system that will pay them a district judge's salary of more than $110,000 a year upon retirement. Louisiana lawmakers who took office after 2000 get no retirement benefits.

Louisiana pays its legislators the above-mentioned $16,800 a year in salary, plus a per diem of $143 a day, plus a $6,000 allowance for "unvouchered" expenses. According to a PAR analysis last year, most Louisiana lawmakers' total compensation — the sum of salary, per diem and the expense allowance — ranges from just above $35,000 to almost $40,000 a year, depending on how many committee meetings and special sessions are held outside of the regularly scheduled annual session. PAR says that reflects the average among states with "hybrid"

legislatures. The average total compensation for lawmakers in "professional" legislatures is roughly $69,000, and only $16,000 in "citizen" legislatures, according to PAR.

Duplessis tells Gambit Weekly that she introduced Senate Bill 672 to start a discussion of the legislative pay issue. She has certainly done that. Unfortunately, much of the talk has focused on current lawmakers and whether they deserve a raise. That tends to personalize the issue and steer discussion away from what we think ought to be the focus — the job itself. One obvious solution to that is to make any pay adjustment prospective. That is, no pay raise should take effect until after the next round of statewide elections in 2011 — which satisfies the argument, "They knew what the pay was when the ran for the job."

One argument that Duplessis raises in support of a pay hike is the fact that Louisiana lawmakers' salaries have not changed in more than two decades, but the workload has increased significantly — particularly after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In addition to more special sessions in recent years, lawmakers are expected to be visible in their districts and to respond to constituents' concerns year-round. Lawmakers did give themselves the $6,000 unvouchered expense allowance in the late 1990s, however. If they adjust their pay package and make it effective in 2012, they will at least be able to say that they didn't give themselves a raise — and that the adjustment came after more than a decade of flat-lined compensation.

On balance, we think a modest, prospective pay increase is justified. We realize this is a most unpopular cause. As The Times-Picayune pointed out, it's supposed to be about public service. No one should enter public life expecting to get rich and retire flush. On the other hand, we expect lawmakers to make billion-dollar decisions and to improve our quality of life. All too often, we get exactly what we pay for.