

# Let's pay legislators more if they give up their job security

Our state legislators haven't gotten a pay raise in years. Their salaries are among the worst in the country.

I'm for giving them more. A lot more.

But not without some strings attached.

I'm borrowing an idea from state Senate leader Phil Berger (R-Rockingham), who proposed 11 percent average pay increases for North Carolina teachers ... as long as they give up job protections afforded by tenure.

"I can't predict what the reaction would be from teachers," Berger said at the press conference last week where he outlined his plan. "But I would point out that I doubt that there's anyone in this room that has tenure in their jobs."

Well, I might have to disagree with that. In a sense, Berger himself has tenure. And just about all our other state legislators have tenure.

Not strictly speaking,

perhaps. Legislators are elected every two years, and if they lose they're out of a job.

But the fact is, they've insulated themselves with very effective job protections. They draw their own districts and, through a political process known as gerrymandering, give themselves a big edge against potential challengers from the opposite party. Many of them also build up fat campaign treasuries so they can vastly outspend opponents.

So here's my proposal: Let's give legislators a substantial pay raise, if they agree to fair elections.

State Rep. Robert Brawley (R-Iredell) already has introduced a bill to raise legislators' salaries from a paltry \$13,951 to \$36,000.

That's a reasonable amount, but only if legislators prove their worth by winning fair elections. I'm not interested in paying someone that much money if he or she has no real



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competition because his or her district is rigged.

This year, 45 state senators are running for reelection, and 20 of them are unopposed. Others have a token opponent — including Democrat William Osborne, who is running against Berger in a safe Republican district.

By the end of this year's first quarter, Berger's campaign reported raising more than \$1.1 million in contributions; Osborne's had received \$1,636. There is not a teacher in this state whose tenure gives her better job security than Berger enjoys through his

overwhelming campaign advantages.

Drawing fair districts — without the gerrymandering meant to assemble groups of reliable Democratic voters here and Republican voters there — still would not make every election a close contest. But many more seats would be competitive than the mere handful across the state today.

Better pay for legislators also would encourage competition. The poor pay makes it impossible for most working men and women to serve in our legislature. The General Assembly draws from a limited pool — people who are retired, who have working spouses or who otherwise aren't tied to a full-time job out of financial necessity. A fair salary would remove this barrier for many North Carolinians who would like to serve in Raleigh.

As a result, more candidates would run for legis-

lative offices, competition would improve and the voters would have better choices. Incumbents, who couldn't count on automatic re-elections anymore, would have to be more responsive to the voters. They might actually *earn* the higher salary, and we'd get a legislative upgrade with representatives who would be more, well, *representative* of the people they serve.

So here's the deal I propose: Legislators put a proposed constitutional amendment on the 2016 ballot. If voters approve — and they would, overwhelmingly — it will create a nonpartisan commission to draw legislative and congressional districts that are geographically compact and don't consider the interests of political parties or incumbents. It will go into effect after the 2020 census, in time for the 2022 elections.

The same constitutional amendment will include

a provision setting salaries for state legislators equivalent to North Carolina's median income for a single-earner family, which is currently a little over \$40,000. That will take effect for representatives and senators elected in 2022.

We could have excellent elections that year, with lots of highly motivated candidates running in fair districts. Voters could feel good about the legislators they elect — and happy to pay them a good salary.

Currently, we have no competitive legislative districts in Guilford County. Every election is a virtual no contest, if not uncontested. So, legislators who get a free ride shouldn't expect to be paid much.

If they want more, they should give up their tenure. Just like they're asking of teachers.

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