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**Appointees get perk: 'double-dipping'; Pension plus salary adds up to sweet deal for a select few**

By Dave McKinney and Chris Fusco

Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD-Larry G. Trent heads the Illinois State Police. Gov. Blagojevich hired him for the job.

But despite Trent's lower profile position, he's on pace to make about $22,000 more than the governor this year because he earns a full-time salary and also collects a pension from the 22 years he worked as a State Police officer.

He's not alone.

A Blagojevich appointee to the state's Educational Labor Relations Board also is expected to make more than the governor because of her salary and pension. And the state's nuclear safety chief is in a similar position, with records showing he'll collect just $1,101 less than Blagojevich's $150,691 yearly salary.

**Lawmaker: 'It's not right'**

This "double-dipping," as some call it, is not illegal. But it's drawing sharp criticism from Democrats and Republicans alike at a time Blagojevich has proposed massive cuts in pension benefits for future state workers and teachers. Layoffs already have occurred.

"It's double-dipping," said Rep. Raymond Poe (R-Springfield), the ranking Republican on the House Committee on Personnel and Pensions. "It's not right, especially with the budgetary times we've got now where we have shortfalls everywhere. If you figure the money they're drawing, divided by $30,000, and that's several employees who could be working."

When told of the hefty incomes of some of his appointees during a Chicago Sun-Times editorial board interview last week, Blagojevich seemed surprised.

"We should look at that. . . . We don't stop to think what kind of pension situation do they have" when making appointments, he said. "I guess you're raising a new question for us to look at."

After they retire, former state employees are explicitly barred from working for state government more than 75 days a year if they are drawing a pension. Coming back full-time means foregoing pension payouts. That law, however, does not apply to gubernatorial appointees who require confirmation by the state Senate.

Those select few employees eligible to draw a salary and pension at the same time can do so as long as they waive membership in the state retirement system and do not accrue credits that would drive up the value of their pensions.

Sen. Bill Brady (R-Bloomington) -- a member of a Blagojevich-appointed panel to study pensions and a potential 2006 rival of the governor -- said the dual rules are discriminatory. He called on Blagojevich's appointees to forgo drawing their pensions.

"The more I think about this, why should a gubernatorial appointee have a special privilege?" Brady said. "If they want the job, give up the pension."

Despite his surprise at what his appointees are being paid, the issue is not entirely unfamiliar to Blagojevich. In January, he helped push through little-noticed legislation allowing his office to hire an ex-judge as chief legal counsel and permitting that person to draw a salary and pension simultaneously.

The bill contained similar language for a top position in Attorney General Lisa Madigan's office. But the judge Blagojevich was seeking opted against taking the job in the governor's office.

Blagojevich last week stressed he does not want anything to distract the Legislature from making pension reforms this spring. He is proposing controversial cuts to pension benefits for future state employees, teachers and university workers to help balance his 2006 budget, estimating the savings on his proposal at $800 million for the first year.

"This is the season for pension reform," Blagojevich said. "To me, that's the biggest priority and the biggest challenge we have to tackle this session."

Springfield lawmakers in recent years have passed legislation to end pension loopholes. Still, the following gubernatorial appointees continue to draw six-figure incomes by working full time and collecting pension checks:

-Trent, 57, retired from the State Police in 1993, allowing him to collect pension benefits set to total $60,214 this year. Blagojevich tapped him to be State Police director in spring 2003, a job that pays him an annual salary of $112,600. That adds up to $172,814 -- $22,123 more than the $150,691 the governor makes.

-Former Illinois State Library Director Bridget L. Lamont, 56, retired from a job as Gov. George Ryan's policy director at the end of 2002 and was appointed by Blagojevich in mid-2004 to the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board. She earns $79,779 in that full-time job and collects $73,973 in pension money for a total of $153,752.

-Gary N. Wright, 62, retired from the Nuclear Safety Department in February 2003, which allowed him to collect a $51,390 annual pension. Almost immediately, he was appointed to head the Nuclear Safety Division of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency -- a job that pays him $98,200 a year. That makes his total income $149,590.

The three either declined comment through spokesmen or could not be reached. They also received sizable one-time payments for unused sick and vacation days, with Trent getting $30,590, Lamont netting $24,107 and Wright receiving $48,298.

A Freedom of Information Act request with the State Retirement System also found two others drawing state salaries and pensions at the same time, though one was given special permission through legislation to do so. Neither was appointed by Blagojevich.

**Ethics panelist got exemption**

Shawn W. Denney, Attorney General Lisa Madigan's appointment to the Illinois Executive Ethics Commission, is paid $31,911 for that part-time post and $57,261 in pension payments for his 26 years of service as a lawyer in the attorney general's office.

When the ethics commissions were put into law, special exemptions were made for situations like Denney's to encourage their participation on the relatively low-paying panel.

Denney, also an Episcopal minister, said he was concerned he might be labeled a double-dipper. But he reasoned the part-time hours he'd work and lower pay he'd get justified his still collecting a pension. "I think that's a big difference," Denney said.

Without being able to collect a pension, "there's no way I could have taken this position," he added.

The other dual-earning official is Stephen B. Schnorf, a $28,923-a-year member of the Illinois Liquor Control Commission whose annual pension is $59,300.

Schnorf retired after a long career in state government, last serving as budget director for former Gov. Ryan, who appointed Schnorf to the part-time panel.

"Given how we're making a big fuss about how we should stop bumping up the salaries of teachers and superintendents at the end of their careers in order to get them bigger pensions and how we're talking about a two-tiered system for future state employees, we better talk about this also," said Sen. Miguel del Valle (D-Chicago).