

April 5, 2009 Sunday

Final Edition

**Gov. Quinn asks: 'Have you no decency?'; Gov calls deal 'an insult to the people of Illinois,' but ex-lawmaker says fuss just 'typical Pat Quinn’**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-A "furious" Gov. Quinn wants to undo a $40,000-a-year pension windfall for a former lawmaker who qualified for the deal after serving only three weeks as Gov. Rod Blagojevich's state parks director.

The State Employees Retirement System decided last month to grant a $113,305 annual pension to former Rep. Kurt Granberg (D-Carlyle), who served briefly as head of the Department of Natural Resources.

That's a 55 percent boost in retirement pay over the $73,017 he would have received annually if his pension been based on his 20 years of service in the Illinois House.

Quinn said Granberg, whom he fired shortly after taking office, is not entitled to the extra money because his appointment in one of Blagojevich's final acts in office was never approved by the Illinois Senate, as state law requires.

Quinn said the increase could leave taxpayers on the hook for $1 million over the course of the 55-year-old former lawmaker's expected lifespan.

"I'm furious," Quinn said. "For him now to seek a huge increase in his pension, I think, is an insult to the people of Illinois.

"And I'd say to Mr. Granberg, 'Have you no decency to take over a million dollars . . . in additional money from the people of Illinois?' " Quinn said.

Granberg, who has had sour relations with Quinn dating back to the 1970s, denied that he accepted Blagojevich's mid-January appointment as a pension grab and insisted he had tried to persuade the governor to appoint him to the DNR post for more than a year.

Granberg said his pension cannot be reduced legally from what the retirement system has calculated because of a constitutional provision that says pension system members' retirement benefits cannot be "diminished or impaired."

Ironically, Granberg helped author a 1994 state pension law that aimed to put an end to legislators working for only a matter of weeks in higher-paying state jobs to boost their pensions. But that law contained an exemption for legislators already in the pension system before 1994.

Granberg was among those who qualified to be grandfathered in. More than two dozen sitting legislators could also qualify, meaning they could join the administration, become a judge or get a job at a university and see their pensions jump like Granberg's did.

That group includes Quinn's choice to head the Illinois Department of Transportation, former Rep. Gary Hannig (D-Litchfield), whose state pension will be based on his administration salary rather than his lower legislative salary.

"I don't think it has merit," Granberg said Friday of Quinn's attack. "It's typical Pat Quinn. He goes for PR. There's usually not a lot of substance. There are more serious issues for him to worry about than a guy from a town of 3,000 people."

But Quinn's office has vowed to use "every legal means" possible to roll back Granberg's pension and has asked Attorney General Lisa Madigan, Quinn's potential rival in the 2010 gubernatorial primary, to determine whether Granberg is entitled to the higher pension.

Madigan spokeswoman Natalie Bauer confirmed the attorney general is "researching possible ways to challenge the pension increase" but did not know when the inquiry would be complete.

Timothy Blair, the retirement system's executive director, did not reply to messages Friday but told the Sun-Times previously that Senate confirmation was not a prerequisite under state law to receive the higher pension benefit.