

Oregon judges need raise, lawyers testify

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Backed by a bevy of lawyers, Oregon's judges say they need a pay increase.

"The vast majority of attorneys, both public and private sector, who appear before Oregon's judges earn more than the judge," said Paul Hurd, the general counsel for Freightliner and chairman of a task force that studied judges' pay last year.

"While no one expects that judges' salaries will be on a par with those in the private sector, the growing disparity in pay between judges and the lawyers who practice in their courts will inevitably erode our ability to attract the kind of people we need to serve on the bench," Hurd said.

In his testimony to a Senate committee Tuesday, Hurd said the youngest and least experienced lawyer on his staff earns more than the \$107,600 paid to Chief Justice Paul De Muniz of Salem, who heads the state court system.

Judges received their most recent increase in mid-2002. The annual pay for a circuit judge is \$95,800. Judges do not qualify for cost-of-living increases that most state employees get, because judges' pay is set by the Legislature.

The task force reported that pay for circuit judges and Supreme Court justices ranks at the bottom of the 50 states, and for Court of Appeals judges, 38th of the 39 states with intermediate-level courts. The figures are based on a 2006 national survey, and subsequent cost-of-living increases.

"The judicial branch cannot continue to fulfill its role with inadequate resources and inadequate compensation," De Muniz said.

De Muniz has urged the Legislature to increase the pay of a circuit judge by roughly 30 percent, to \$125,000, and approve similar increases for the Tax Court judge, the 10 Court of Appeals judges, and the seven Supreme Court justices.

Bill Sime, a Salem lawyer who spoke for the Oregon Association of Defense Counsel, said a 30 percent increase would bring Oregon judicial pay closer to the average of their counterparts in Washington, California, Idaho and Nevada.

Derek Johnson, a Eugene lawyer who spoke for the Oregon Trial Lawyers Association, said a pay increase for judges is a rare point of agreement between plaintiffs' and defense lawyers.

Poor pay makes it harder to attract candidates for judgeships, some said.

"This is particularly true in small communities outside the Willamette Valley, where there are fewer lawyers and the strongest lawyers enjoy their autonomy and earn a comfortable living," said Gov. Ted Kulongoski, a former Supreme Court justice, in a letter to the committee.

The Legislature has before it another proposal that would let an independent commission, with a majority of public members, set the pay of all state elected officials.

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What's next

Senate Bill 456 is likely to go to the Legislature's budget-writing panel, which will decide toward the end of the session

whether judges get a pay increase. The bill contains no figures.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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