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## Capitol staffers receive raises

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More than 120 Assembly aides were granted salary increases recently despite a rocky state economy and projections of a multibillion-dollar budget shortfall next year.

The pay hikes come at a time when most other state workers are required to take an unpaid furlough each month to save money.

The raises also could affect balloting next month, when voters will decide the fate of a measure to extend new tax increases in return for a limit on future state spending.

"They're claiming that we are facing financial Armageddon at the same time they're handing out pay increases," said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, which is helping to rally opposition to the controversial Proposition 1A.

"How could they be so stupid? Did they think we wouldn't notice? ... I think it will absolutely hurt them at the polls."

Assembly Speaker Karen Bass said her legislative house has reduced its personnel and streamlined operations, thus allowing it to reduce spending while offering pay increases to some deserving aides who haven't received them in years.

"Should I have held the raises until after the election?" Bass said. "To tell you the truth, I was trying to properly manage the institution. I wasn't making decisions based on politics."

Bass said that the Assembly is sharing the pain of recession by diverting \$15 million of its budget to other state agencies. It has pledged the money to fight wildfires, conduct Capitol tours and operate a Capitol Fellows program for students.

The Assembly speaker, a Los Angeles Democrat, also noted that many Assembly employees did not receive a pay increase, including Nolice Edwards, her chief of staff, and Dave Sebeck, a chief consultant for Bass' office.

Edwards will continue receiving her current pay, \$190,000 annually, a sum that was boosted by \$50,000 a few months after Bass replaced Fabian Núñez as Assembly leader last year.

Assembly Republican leader Mike Villines, in a written statement, echoed Bass' comments.

"The Assembly met its goal of reducing its operating budget by 10 percent," Villines said. "Some longtime staff received pay raises, but we also eliminated positions and made significant spending reductions to our budget in other areas."

The Senate continues to honor a pay freeze implemented Jan. 14, said Greg Schmidt, Senate secretary.

Both the Democratic and Republican caucuses benefited in the Assembly by the new pay increases, nearly all of them 5 percent, state records show.

Nearly two-thirds of the raises went to aides for Democrats, who are in the majority, rather than to GOP aides – 81 to 41, respectively, records show.

Aides of all salary levels, from secretaries to senior consultants, were among those receiving boosts in their paychecks.

Fifty-three of the aides had salaries exceeding \$80,000 before the sweetener, including 33 whose pay topped \$100,000, records show.

Assembly Democrats' pay hikes took effect April 1, while the Republican Caucus increases took effect in February.

Jon Waldie, the Assembly's chief administrative officer, said recipients of the raises had not received pay hikes in the recent past, averaging more than two years for Democrats and more than a year for Republicans, he said.

The tally included 122 aides to the Assembly leadership staff of either party, and did not include personnel assigned to individual Assembly members.

The number also does not include an unspecified number of Democratic and Republican caucus aides who were approved for raises but whose paperwork will not be completed until Monday, officials said.

Political analysts said the pay raises are likely to harm the Legislature's already dismal approval rating among voters.

"It's pretty stupid," said John J. Pitney, government professor at Claremont McKenna College. "I think the ballot measures are in trouble already, and this just makes the climb steeper."

Pitney said the pay hikes are a pittance for the Assembly – the Legislature's combined annual budget exceeds \$262 million – but "the political symbolism is really damaging."

Sylvia Castillo, one of Bass' closest friends long before the latter was elected to office, received one of the highest percentage pay increases, nearly 16 percent.

But Castillo's raise from \$7,917 to \$9,167 per month stemmed from changes in her title and her role. Rather than coordinate a single district office, she now coordinates offices throughout Southern California, Edwards said.

Lawmakers will not benefit personally from the pay hikes, because their salaries are set by an independent pay commission. Assembly members receive a base salary of \$116,208 and are eligible for about \$35,000 in per diem pay for living expenses while in Sacramento.

California's Assembly and Senate budgets are determined largely by a formula stemming from Proposition 130, a 1990 constitutional amendment that slashed legislative spending immediately and set the stage for future increases.

Specifically, maximum funding is determined by adjusting prior-year spending to recognize changes in population and per capita income. The formula paid off handsomely as California's economy boomed.

The Legislature's budget rose from \$182 million to more than \$262 million from the years 2000 through 2008-09, an increase of nearly 44 percent – far higher than inflation, which averaged 3.2 percent annually.

Even during this year's recession, while California's general fund fell, the Proposition 140 formula gave the Assembly a \$3.8 million raise in the coming fiscal year, and the Senate a \$2.8 million increase, before voluntary reductions.

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