

## Conti will accept pay increase

By: **ALISON HAWKES** (Wed, Jul/27/2005)

HARRISBURG - Like his fellow Republican and colleague Stewart Greenleaf, state Sen. Joe Conti of Bucks County said he voted in favor of the controversial legislative pay hike because he wanted to see judicial and executive level pay increases.

"It's very difficult to increase judicial and other state government salaries without looking at the Legislature and historically that's the way it's been done," he said.

Conti said he would accept a raise of what amounts to \$20,000 a year, made possible by his role as a majority chair of Senate Game and Fisheries Committee.

The 2 a.m. Senate vote on the matter was a close call, with 23 out of 50 senators voting against it. Fellow Bucks Sens. Robert Wonderling, R-24, and Robert Tomlinson, R-6, both voted against the measure. Wonderling has said he thinks it's right to stay at the same salary in which he was elected into office; Tomlinson has said it's simply not the right time for the state to be giving pay increases.

Conti said he supports a Legislative pay increase, but would not elaborate further.

He also criticized the media for the way it has handled the pay-raise issue, which first surfaced in November but wasn't passed by the end of session. The proposal then was nearly the same as what passed in July, he said.

"One of the more interesting parts of this whole saga is, some of the reporters who wrote the stories last November about the issue, when we almost did it and perhaps should have done it, are writing this as some kind of 'gotcha,' " Conti said.

However, details on this year's proposal were not made publicly available until a few hours before the vote.

Both Greenleaf and Conti said they preferred that the vote on judicial pay raises had been made into a separate bill. For Greenleaf, that would have allowed him to cast a different vote on the Legislative pay raise.

"It was not my choice. I would have preferred to keep it separate and it would have been less complicated," Greenleaf said.

By combining all the pay raises together, House and Senate leadership were able to stiffen wavering support.

Inserted in the new legislation is a clause that would cause the whole measure to sink (judicial salaries and all) if one element is later struck down by the courts. Most legally vulnerable is the inclusion of "unvouchered expenses," which allows lawmakers to skirt constitutional requirements by collecting the equivalent of pay raises before the official start of the next session in December 2006.

Greenleaf said he's filed the necessary forms to forgo "unvouchered expenses" as well. Conti said he will accept them.

**Alison Hawkes can be reached at (717) 705-6330 or [ahawkes@calkins-media.com](mailto:ahawkes@calkins-media.com).**

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