

Debate on revoking pensions continues

By Brian Lockhart
Staff Writer
Stamford Advocate

Article Launched:04/09/2008 01:00:00 AM EDT

HARTFORD - Area lawmakers are divided on whether to retroactively revoke the pensions of corrupt state and municipal officials and employees.

Democrats in the House of Representatives privately discussed the issue yesterday

"We had a long meeting," said state Rep. Christel Truglia, D-Stamford. "There was a lot of opposition to the retroactive" measure.

State Rep. Christopher Caruso, D-Bridgeport, who is championing the measure in the House, led the briefing. Caruso later said he would push for the retroactive pension measure in a broader package of ethics reforms the General Assembly is considering.

"It ain't over until it's over," Caruso said. "I have no intention of giving up."

Caruso and state Sen. Gayle Slossberg, D-Milford, co-chairmen of the Government Administrations and Elections Committee, have been fighting to retroactively reduce or revoke pensions. They want to target any state or municipal official or employee found guilty of corruption over the past 10 years.

According to a list provided by Caruso, if passed, the new law would affect the pensions of eight people, including former Republican Gov. John Rowland, former Bridgeport Mayor Joseph Ganim, a Democrat, and former Democratic state Rep. Donnie Sellers of Norwalk.

"I do know there are questions in both chambers as to whether we've got the votes," Slossberg said yesterday.

Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell; Senate President Donald Williams, D-Brooklyn; Senate Minority Leader John McKinney, R-Fairfield; and House Minority Leader Lawrence Cafero, R-Norwalk, have expressed concerns or opposition to the measure.

"Why put in jeopardy the entire ethics package . . . for this retroactivity piece?" Cafero said yesterday.

He accused Democratic proponents of going after Rowland, who is due a state pension of about \$50,000 a year at age 55 in 2012.

Opponents of the retroactive pension grab have said the move would be illegal.

State Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat, wrote in a letter to Caruso that he "cannot predict" how a court would rule, but his office would "vigorously defend" the law against any legal challenge.

"I support legislation that applies a fair judicial process to revoke or reduce state pensions . . . regardless of when the offense occurred," Blumenthal wrote. "There are cogent and compelling arguments to support the pension revocation law."

Blumenthal's letter did not satisfy state Rep. Christopher Perone, D-Norwalk, who remains on the fence.

State Rep. Bruce Morris, D-Norwalk, opposes the bill.

"As a legal precedent, it's a matter of changing rules in the middle of the game," Morris said.

But state Rep. James Shapiro, D-Stamford, disagreed.

"I'm OK with it," he said. "There are a lot of criminals who probably don't know the legal ramifications of their actions. That doesn't mean they shouldn't pay for their crimes."

State Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, said he has some concerns but generally believes individuals "who violate the public trust

through their elected positions ought not continue to receive payments from the state."

"Rowland should lose his pension," Tong said.

Caruso believes the General Assembly should debate the retroactive pension provision in public. If it passes and is challenged, he said, a court would settle the legality question.

Cafero said he also has a problem with what he calls the "arbitrary" decision to go back 10 years to revoke or reduce pensions.

"Why not 12 years? Why not 14 years? How about 15? Twenty?" he said.

State Rep. Carlo Leone, D-Stamford, agreed, calling the retroactive provision "heavy-handed."

"No one's disputing the fact people did bad things," he said. "But they were all held accountable and paid their price according to the law."

Many lawmakers were concerned about targeting pensions of public employees in general.

Leone said the law as proposed appears unfair because it treats newer staff and long-time workers with accrued pensions equally.

"How is your five years equal to my 30 years?" Leone said.

Truglia said she was concerned about the affect pension revocation could have on families.

State Rep. Gerald Fox, D-Stamford, said he might vote for the legislation if it were flexible enough to consider how the loss of a pension would affect innocent relatives.

For state Rep. Joseph Mioli, D-Westport, the entire push for ethics reform is insulting.

"I take it personally," said Mioli, saying the ethics package implies that a majority of lawmakers are rotten.

"To me it hurts right here," he said, pointing to his heart.

[Close Window](#)

[Send To Printer](#)