How state lawmakers pump up pensions in ways workers can't

By Thomas Frank, USA Today

At age 55, South Carolina state Sen. David Thomas began collecting a pension for his legislative service without leaving office.

Most workers must retire from their jobs before getting retirement benefits. But Thomas used a one-sentence law that he and his colleagues passed in 2002 to let legislators receive a taxpayer-funded pension instead of a salary after serving for 30 years.

Thomas' $32,390 annual retirement benefit — paid for the rest of his life — is more than triple the $10,400 salary he gave up. His pension exceeds the salary because of another perk: Lawmakers voted to count their expenses in the salary used to calculate their pensions.

No other South Carolina state workers get those perks.

Since January 2005, Thomas, a Republican, has made $148,435 more than a legislative salary would have paid, his financial-disclosure records show. At least four other South Carolina lawmakers are getting pensions instead of salaries, netting an extra $292,000 since 2005, records show.

Pension perks aren't unique to legislators in South Carolina.

More than 4,100 legislators in 33 states are positioned to benefit from special retirement laws that they and their predecessors have enacted to boost their pensions by up to $100,000 a year, a USA TODAY investigation found. Even as legislators cut basic state services and slash benefits for police, teachers and other workers, they have preserved pension laws that grant themselves perks unavailable to voters they serve or workers they direct.

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