

Select California lawmakers had more money to spend in 2011

By Jim Sanders and Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

With California billions behind on its budget and public services shrinking, the Assembly collectively tightened its belt last year – but not all of its members did.

Records released under court order show that Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez boosted the budgets of six members by tens of thousands of dollars apiece despite the fiscal emergency.

Member-by-member records lift the curtain, for the first time, on how often Pérez used his authority to add to lawmakers' budgets, who benefited, and by what amounts.

Most Assembly members stayed within dollar limits set by Pérez; in fact, five legislators returned more than \$150,000 apiece that they were authorized to spend, records show. But Assembly Republican Nathan Fletcher and Democrats Wilmer Amina Carter, Julia Brownley, Jim Beall, Sandré Swanson and Anthony Portantino saw their discretionary funding boosted by Pérez in a year when most state agencies were slashing costs.

Nearly every recipient of an augmentation from Pérez was a Democrat. The party's members control the 80-person house and receive the most coveted posts and largest budgets. Republicans typically receive some aid from their caucus to fund staff.

Any extra money from Pérez went to the members' committee or leadership coffers, not to their personal office budget of \$263,000, making it difficult for the public to track how much was spent on personal aides.

Overall, the newly released records shed light on the extent to which legislators use committee funds for their own purposes: Of more than \$17.5 million in committee funding last year, roughly \$8.8 million was spent for committee staff and \$8.7 million for office or district aides of their chairmen.

Totals are from Assembly data through mid-October and the house's own projections of its spending through the Nov. 30 end of the legislative year.

Robin Swanson, Pérez's spokeswoman, said that the Los Angeles Democrat "offsets any necessary augmentations by reducing Assembly spending overall."

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