

California lawmakers set to take pay cut

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

California elected officials from governor to legislator will see their pay cut by thousands of dollars next month under decisions made by appointees of former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Effective Dec. 3, Gov. Jerry Brown's pay will drop to \$165,288. Legislators will be paid \$90,526, legislative leaders \$104,105. Salaries for constitutional officers from attorney general to secretary of state will range from \$143,571 to \$123,965.

But Brown's administration will soon control a majority of seats on the salary-setting commission as two seats become vacant Dec. 31, ensuring that his appointees will fill four of the seven positions. The turnover could change attitudes on a commission that moved aggressively in recent years to cut pay and perks for state elected officials.

Charles Murray, a Schwarzenegger appointee on the commission, said he expects labor unions to gain clout with Brown's two pending appointments – and for the seven-member panel to start raising officials' salaries once California's budget deficit ends.

"Everything is going to swing the other way," he said.

The panel, created by a voter-passed initiative in 1990, voted to make the pay cut in May. At the time Brown said, "I'd run for governor whether it was a paid job or not."

Next month's reductions slash \$8,699 from Brown's annual salary. Legislators will lose \$4,765, legislative leaders

\$5,479. Constitutional officers from attorney general to secretary of state will see drops ranging from \$7,556 to \$6,525.

Aaron Read, a longtime Capitol lobbyist, said the cut creates unfairly low salaries that could discourage the "best and brightest" candidates from seeking office in a state of nearly 40 million people that has one of the world's largest economies.

Read contends the pay cut was meant as a slap at officeholders while state government was wrestling with billions in red ink and service cuts.

"It was clear that it was punitive," Read said. "I think the commission should be disbanded. I think it's done a grave disservice to the state."

Murray countered that elected officials need to share in fiscal sacrifice. "In tough times you have to do tough things," he said.

Kris Vosburg, executive director of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, said "average folks would say they're still overpaid."

The pay cut of 5 percent next month is in addition to an 18 percent reduction in officeholder salaries and fringe benefits in 2009, and elimination of the Legislature's car-lease program in late 2011.

Brown's restructuring of the board began last year, when he appointed labor union business manager Tom Dalzell to the panel and designated him as chairman, adding a voice of restraint to a board that has sharply cut compensation.

Dalzell votes only if the panel is deadlocked, however, and it was not when it voted on May 31. Four of five Schwarzenegger appointees, joined by one Brown appointee, agreed to slash

elected officials' pay by 5 percent when the new legislative session begins.

Dalzell, before the vote, noted that supporters' argument for reducing elected officials' pay was that state workers were about to take a similar cut. Ultimately, workers' hours were reduced 5 percent temporarily through a monthly furlough day, but their rate of pay was not changed.

"I want to maintain my impartiality as chairman, but I think the commission acted on assumptions that did not play out," Dalzell said recently.

Dalzell, a leader of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1245, said he would be willing to consider restoring some of the previous cuts once the state's budget outlook brightens. State law bars the panel from raising pay in years of deficit.

Peak salaries for elected officials, in 2008, ranged from \$212,179 for governor to \$116,208 for legislators.

Key legislative aides, many of whom received a pay hike this year, routinely earn substantially higher salaries than the officeholders they serve.

Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez's chief of staff receives \$190,000 a year, for example, while the Democratic legislative leader makes \$109,584 now and will see that fall to \$104,105 on Dec. 3.

Democrat Ken Cooley must quit his job as a senator's legislative director to represent Sacramento County in the Assembly. His pay will drop from \$108,792 as an aide to \$90,526 as a legislator.

"I knew I was taking a pay cut – that's OK," said Cooley, who also must resign his \$6,000-per-year job as Rancho Cordova councilman. "My wife is a church bookkeeper. We live within

our means. And I believe in public service.”

Assemblyman Jeff Gorell, R-Camarillo, said the 5 percent cut “is not going to be easy,” but “we’ve adjusted our income to it.”

“Frankly, I think it sends the right message when we’re making cuts to vital state programs,” he said.

Pérez and Senate President Darrell Steinberg declined to comment on the pay cut.

Sabrina Lockhart, spokeswoman for Assembly Republican leader Connie Conway, said the “commission was created to take salary-making out of the hands of legislators and she’ll accept whatever decision they make.”

Even with the new 5 percent cut, California lawmakers’ \$90,526 salary will lead the nation in base pay, followed by Pennsylvania, \$82,026 and New York, \$79,500, according to a 2012 survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The two East Coast states arguably rank highest in total compensation, however, because legislators there can qualify for pension and retirement medical benefits, while California lawmakers cannot.

California legislative salaries pale in comparison to judges and to many city managers, college presidents, auditors and district attorneys.