GOP budget leaders urge 3 percent raises for state workers, higher pay for new state troopers

BY MICHAEL MARTZ Richmond Times-Dispatch

Virginia State Police would receive a major boost in salary - almost $7,000 a year - on top of a 3-percent raise that General Assembly budget leaders promised today to restore to state employees in their first pay check in July.

The compensation package agreed upon by budget leaders in the House of Delegates and Senate would increase a trooper’s starting pay from $36,207 a year to $43,000, a boost of almost $7,000 a year. All sworn officers would receive the increase to prevent salaries for veteran officers from lagging behind new hires.

Combined with the 3-percent raise for all state employees, the starting salary for state police would rise to $44,290 under the budget plan unveiled Wednesday.

“It's been a long, long time in coming,” said former State Police Superintendent M. Wayne Huggins, now executive director of the Virginia State Police Association. “This is going to be extremely well-received up and down the ranks.”

Assembly leaders have made their top

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priority to restore the pay raise for state employees that was canceled on Dec. 1 because of a revenue shortfall now projected at $1.26 billion. They also have made clear they do not support Gov. Terry McAuliffe’s proposed 1.5-percent, one-time bonus.

In a radio appearance Wednesday on Washington’s WTOP, McAuliffe said he supports a raise, as long as the budget forecast is strong enough to support it.

“We all want to do it,” McAuliffe said. “But listen, we got whacked 2011 through ‘13 with sequestration in Virginia.”

Senate Majority Leader Thomas K. Norment Jr., R-James City, who also is co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, emphasized “a cultural change” in the cooperation of Senate and House leaders in the budget review process. “We have a common set of priorities,” he said at a news conference announcing the compensation commitments.

At the top of the list has been pay for state police, which have lost hundreds of employees to retirement and resignation since the revenue shortfall and loss of the scheduled raises became apparent last summer.

"I'm confident this is going to stop the hemorrhaging,” Huggins said.

The package also satisfied Sen. Charles W. Carrico Sr., R-Grayson, a former state trooper who agreed today for Senate Finance to kill bills he proposed to raise money for state police and law enforcement generally by raising the vehicle registration fee and the sales tax on purchases at state liquor stores.

"What they’re going to put forward is going to take effect immediately,” Carrico said after the Finance Committee meeting. “So I’m happy.”

Employee compensation emerged as the dominant issue facing the General Assembly last fall, when a commission led by House Speaker William J. Howell, R-Staunton, made restoring the raises its top priority rather than pension reforms Howell sought.

"State employees are the number one priority of the General Assembly," said R. Ronald Jordan, executive director of the Virginia Governmental Employees Association and a member of the commission. "It makes us feel pretty damn good."

House Appropriations Chairman S. Chris Jones opened the committee's annual retreat in November with a vow to find money for state police pay, a promise echoed by Senate Finance leaders.

In a speech on the House floor Wednesday, Jones said: "For too many years we have treated our state employees as an afterthought in the budget process."

Restoring the raise for state employees will cost the state $70.6 million and the additional money for state police will cost $15.5 million, including $4 million already in the governor's budget to address salary compression. Legislators intend to pay for the package with savings identified by the governor for his bonus proposal, as well as
additional money from cuts made to other new spending initiatives.

"This is a major priority," said Sen. Janet D. Howell, D-Fairfax, who supported Carrico's funding proposals for police. "But it means every other part of the budget is severely constrained."

The package also will include $8.7 million that McAuliffe proposed last month to restore to help sheriff's departments address salary compression, in which pay for veterans lags new hires. Jones said the committees were "still discussing" how to address pay for state-supported local employees, such as sheriff's departments and other constitutional offices.

The package does not include money to pay for raises for teachers or higher education faculty because legislators said most school divisions, colleges and universities chose last fall to give raises even after the state eliminated its share of the cost.

Jones said he expects the House budget to put a significant amount of general fund dollars into categorical education programs to free Virginia Lottery funds to be distributed to school divisions on a per-pupil basis to use as they wish.

"I would see us doing more in that regard," he said.

Norment, an adjunct professor at the College of William and Mary, said budget leaders are still looking for ways to help colleges and universities that didn't provide raises to faculty and other staff to do so. "We really have not locked down on that," he said.

The money committees also said they expect to do more for employees in high-turnover, underpaid jobs, such as direct-care aides and nurses in state behavioral health facilities. "We really need to target turnover," said Senate Finance Co-Chairman Emmett W. Hanger Jr., R-Augusta.

Hanger said he expects the committees to make a significant investment in Virginia's behavioral health system, although he stopped short of saying the legislature would support all of the $31.7 million in new investments proposed by McAuliffe for treatment of mental illness and substance use disorders.

He and other budget leaders also said they expect to support most of the governor's proposed changes in tax policy to generate additional revenue, including maintaining the current threshold for businesses to remit sales taxes to the state on an accelerated basis.

However, the Senate Finance Committee promised today to study the future acceleration of sales tax collections in response to bills Sen. Glen H. Sturtevant Jr., R-Richmond proposed to address the issue. Retail merchants strongly oppose the accelerated collections.

House Finance Chairman R. Lee Ware Jr., R-Powhatan, said he expects the House to resurrect one of the governor's proposals to cap the deduction a taxpayer can take for rehabilitation of historic property, which would generate almost $10 million in the next fiscal year. Last week, a Finance subcommittee killed one version of the proposal, capping the deduction claimed on a return at $5 million, which generally would only apply to a few large insurance companies.

Ware expects a different fate for another bill with the same purpose, sponsored by
Del. Robert S. Bloxom Jr., R-Accomack. However, he is less sure whether the House would support McAuliffe's proposal to cap the amount of credits for land preservation that taxpayers can claim in annual tax returns - which the subcommittee also killed last week, opening a $6.1 million hole in next year's projected revenues.

"I don't know if the House is going to do that," he said.

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Reporter Graham Moomaw contributed to this story.
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Sorry the state police does not need any more troopers. This is just to get more money for the state. What about teachers, the state gives the county money and tells them how to teach, but does not include them in a pay raise?

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I hope the teachers get a raise as well-can remember back in the 80's-3 years in a row teachers recieved 10% -State employees got 0000! Under Governor's Robb and Baliles

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