

Editorial

Constitutional Amendment

Public employees in Illinois have faithfully contributed their share to public pension plans from the moment they were hired.

Legislative bodies including the Illinois General Assembly have not contributed their share, however. Some years they put in the required funding; most years they don't. So now, Illinois public pension funding is short \$85 billion. Even the Illinois Policy Institute, a conservative group, says the shortfall results from "decades of underfunding." That under-funding was on the part of the politicians, not the workers.

Workers ask only for the pensions promised them as part of their contracts when they were hired. In Illinois, the average public pension benefit is \$27,400. Not exactly a figure that puts retirees in the lap of luxury. And remember, most of these workers, because of their public pensions that now are in jeopardy, were prohibited from contributing to Social Security. The \$27,400 is not on top of Social Security; it is in place of it.

The General Assembly has made a few attempts at pension changes, but despite the efforts of some business groups to paint public workers and retirees as greedy loafers, pension reform has proven to be the third rail of Illinois politics. Politicians know that public employees and their families, and those citizens of Illinois who like the teachers, firefighters, police officers, university employees, and librarians who make public salaries, compose a big portion of the voting public.

Pension "reform" efforts consistently have gone nowhere, as politicians fear alienating this huge voting bloc. The politicians also have feared alienating the public for nothing, because even if they pass a reform bill, that pesky Constitution of the State of Illinois says that pension benefits for State and local government workers "shall not be diminished or impaired." No politician wants to put his or her career on the line voting for an unpopular measure, only to have it be declared unconstitutional.

So our intrepid politicians think they have figured out a dippy-do around this problem by putting Constitutional Amendment #49 on the ballot, which would require a 3/5 majority vote of a legislative body to increase pension benefits, but only a simple majority to reduce them. Constitutional protection gone; get 50% of legislators plus one to go along with any benefit slashing plan, and it becomes law.

They know that most constitutional amendments pass. This one is around 700 words, but the first few sentences sound good, and they know most people won't read beyond that. They also know that with the White House and Congress up for grabs, this down-the-ballot amendment will get little publicity. With all that going for Amendment #49, they figure the public will back into giving them approval to do whatever they want to public employees' hard-earned pensions.

Vote no on #49

Here are some reasons to vote no on Constitutional Amendment #49.

- Crippling collective bargaining rights for public employees is one step down the very slippery slope of curtailing collective bargaining rights for private employees. So this amendment would affect more than the public sector.
- Curtailed benefits will mean that good public employees will be open to leaving Illinois jobs and taking their expertise out of state. And just try attracting good workers to public and private jobs with poor benefits. Such a one-two punch will cripple future economic growth in Illinois. It also will cripple the viability of all public services in Illinois. You know, those luxuries like police and fire protection and education.
- The purposely vague and verbose amendment uses terminology like "governing body," "emolument benefit," and "beneficial determination." The State of Illinois will end up spending millions trying to defend this one in court.
- Amendment #49 would grant unprecedented power to State and local governments to make changes to pension benefits and existing law. You trust the Politicians to do the right thing, right? You know, those same politicians who bankrupted the system in the first place.

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- By requiring a 3/5 vote to improve benefits, the amendment would allow a legislative minority to dictate to the majority. We see how well that has worked in the U.S. Senate these last few years.
- And in the end, this amendment would result in no savings to taxpayers.

Elected officials: Grow some spine

Ann Lousin, a professor at Chicago's John Marshall Law School, calls the amendment "catastrophic."

It is, and so is the behavior of the State's politicians. The six sponsors of this amendment were Democrats, who like to portray themselves as friends of the worker. The amendment passed the House 113-0 and the Senate 51-2 (the dissenting heroes were Mike Frerichs, D-Champaign, and Mike Jacobs, D-Moline.)

Our intrepid Senators and Representatives from this community did nothing to stop this amendment. They should be ashamed. Voting yes on Amendment 49 were all of our local State Reps: Edward Acevedo, Kimberly du Buclet, Ken Dunkin, Esther Golar, Derrick Smith, Cynthia Soto, and Arthur Turner. Our local State Senators Mattie Hunter and Antonio Munoz backed them up. Only State Senator Annazette Collins, who is leaving office, did not vote yes. She just didn't vote.

To our local State Reps and State Senators, we say: Grow some spine. Stop voting for whatever Madigan and Cullerton want. Vote for what's good for your constituents. Are there no State and municipal workers in your districts? Those are the people you should be representing. If you're going to automatically vote for what Madigan and Cullerton want, why are you even in office?

That is a question the voters should ask as well, with the next election only a month away. If our local representatives are going to vote in lockstep for legislation that harms the electorate, then the electorate should no longer vote in lockstep and automatically return these people to office.

There are good pension reform plans—the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois has one, for example. Amendment #49 is not a pension reform plan. It's an attack on workers that almost every politician in the Illinois General Assembly is going along with.

The public does not have to join them. Vote no on Constitutional Amendment #49, and make the politicians do the hard work on true pension reform.