

Illinois' Crisis

Individual recipients of government pensions and government employees - public servants - have been cast as the point of blame in the Illinois pension debate, although the development and funding of the pension systems is conducted by the Legislature and this is a decades-old problem.

Constitutional Amendment 49, on the Illinois Nov. 6 ballot, makes it clear that many of our legislators want to build reform on our backs. Instead of supporting employees of governments across the state and all voters by building a true economic solution, they victimize us. Their neatest and newest attack on retiree beneficiaries and public employees is Illinois Constitutional Amendment 49.

It would give unprecedented power to state and local governments to make changes to pension benefits and existing law. It is not the much-needed plan that will provide savings to taxpayers, and there is nothing in this constitutional change that addresses the state's financial crisis.

If it is approved, the Illinois General Assembly could modify our pension benefits by removing the current contract protection clause in the constitution. Specifically, the protection that we now have (Article XIII, Section 5) says that "Membership in any pension or retirement system of the State, any unit of local government or school district, or any agency or instrumentality thereof shall be an enforceable contractual relationship, the benefits of which shall not be diminished or impaired."

What change would it bring? That has to do with the language of the amendment, cleverly written to draw voters to say "yes" rather than a resounding "no?" Under Clause 1, it will take 60 percent of both houses to increase a pension benefit. But Clause 2 is the dangerous change as it indicates that at any time and in anyway, the General Assembly may take any action that restricts benefit increases. That includes cost-of-living adjustments or any other aspect of our pensions and benefits.

So while Clause 1 requires a supermajority to increase a pension benefit, Amendment 49 would allow the General Assembly to restrict or eliminate any benefit with a simple majority vote.

I am a member of the State Universities Annuitants Association; it recommends a "no" vote on Constitutional Amendment 49 and so do I.

Nancy J Cohen, retiree from the University of Illinois at Chicago

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