

May 24, 2008 Saturday

Final Edition

**Gov.'s pal gets huge pension boost; 8 weeks as adviser hikes ex-lawmaker's yearly take $38,000 -- critic slams 'abuse of . . . system'**

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SPRINGFIELD-Former state Sen. Carol Ronen's brief gig in Gov. Blagojevich’s office has proven as lucrative as a win in the Illinois Lottery.

Ronen worked just eight weeks for the governor earlier this year, but that job will provide her with a windfall of at least $37,995 every year for the rest of her life.

Ronen's stint as a Blagojevich senior adviser is enabling the governor's onetime Senate floor leader to reel in a $102,000-a-year state pension. Ronen, 63, will earn 35 percent more in retirement than she did as a $75,301-a-year legislator representing part of Chicago's North Side lakefront.

Had Blagojevich not hired Ronen and she retired from the Senate at this time, her pension would be $64,005 annually.

"Her increase alone is $38,000 a year," said Rep. Jack Franks (D-Woodstock). "That's more than the majority of Illinoisans make."

Ronen defended the money she will earn in retirement. She left the governor's office to become a volunteer for U.S. Sen. Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

"My entire career has been devoted to public service, part of the time in the Legislature and part of the time in the executive branches of state and city governments," Ronen said. "My pension is based on all those years of service. It's not a scam."

The General Assembly Retirement System allows legislators as young as 55 to earn pensions equal to 85 percent of their final salaries -- regardless of whether those salaries are in the Legislature or in better-paid positions elsewhere in government.

Legislative pensioners like Ronen, who has applied to begin getting her retirement money, get 3 percent hikes each year into perpetuity, making the retirement system one of the most generous in the country. There are no state taxes imposed on that money.

Franks cited Ronen as an example of "abuse of the pension system," adding that "it illustrates why it's no surprise our pension system is in peril and why citizens have lost faith in the governor."

Ronen said she meant to stay on Blagojevich's staff longer, but "circumstances just didn't permit that.

"There's a huge, huge deficit in this current year's budget, $750 million, and another one looming for the next one. All the projects I was interested in required resources. . . . Plus, you see what's happening in Springfield. There is a toxic environment that pervades everything," she said.

Ronen was elected to the Illinois House in 1992 and served five terms there before moving to the Senate in 2000. As a senator, she voted for a 2003 law that went after bloated legislative pensions.

For her pension to be based upon her $120,000-a-year governor's office salary rather than her final legislative pay, Ronen had to spend one month working under Blagojevich. Ronen was hired March 1 and left the governor's office April 30.

Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff declined to offer time sheets or work product for Ronen and said Ronen's pension was "never discussed and wasn't a consideration" in Ronen's hiring.

"The governor and Sen. Ronen have worked together as colleagues on a number of issues like health care and early-childhood education," Ottenhoff said. "We intended for her role to be a long-term one."