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EDITORIAL

Rewarding the Good Ones

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that judges in New York be paid more money, especially when everyone is worried about the quality of a judiciary that springs from the state's patronage-prone system of judicial elections.

But being a good judge is not an easy job, and there has not been a judicial salary increase in six years. A judge serving since 1995 would have received just one pay raise, and a judge serving since 1988 would have received just two. As the chief judge, Judith Kaye, points out, a salary adjustment is way overdue. As it is, the salaries paid New York judges now lag far behind the amounts paid federal court judges doing comparable jobs, typically in a less stressful setting. New York has also lost ground to other states, falling to 23rd among the 50 states when judicial compensation is adjusted to take into account the region's high cost of living.

Meanwhile, regular increases for nonjudicial court personnel have narrowed – and in some instances closed – the gap between the judges and their support personnel. This is obviously unfair. Beyond that, keeping judicial salaries at a depressed level, not much above the starting pay for a beginning associate at New York City's top law firms, is not a strategy destined to attract and retain top-quality judges.

Bills introduced in the State Assembly and State Senate at the request of Chief Judge Kaye and the state's chief administrative judge, Jonathan Lippman, would restore the salaries of justices on the State Supreme Court, New York's main trial court, to parity with those of Federal District Court judges, and would make proportionate adjustments in salaries paid state appellate judges.

The measures also call for the creation of a blue ribbon commission with authority to review salary levels every two years and make appropriate adjustments.

The raises under consideration are not a giveaway. They are a basic investment in the state's justice system – one that Gov. George Pataki and the State Legislature should be willing to approve.