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Don't penalize state workers twice for economy

Barbara Hopkins

I told Gov. Kulongoski after his "re-set" speech Friday that I appreciate how complimentary he was to state workers — and how disappointed I am that he thinks we ought to sacrifice even more to cover future gaps in revenue.

"I know it is popular to blame public employees for every problem facing government," he told the Portland City Club. "That is not true — and it is not fair. Public employees are not to blame for our deficits."

Why then, I asked, does he think we should pay so much to cover them? He had no answer.

Pay state workers on a par with private-sector workers, the governor said in his speech, implying that our compensation is out of line. Except, studies by his administration show we are already paid less than private-sector workers who do similar work, even counting the cost of health and retirement benefits.

I am a case in point. I literally learned the value of a dollar as a kid in Scappoose, where they let us out of school to earn 90 cents a flat to bring in the berry crop. So I appreciated what I later earned as an insurance claims adjuster, where I earned a decent wage but lacked good health or retirement benefits.

When I went to work for the state, I took a pay cut but got better benefits. I started as a custodian in Portland and transferred to Salem, where there were more opportunities. In three years I was doing white-collar work again, but it took me 12 long years to match what I earned in the private sector.

I process workers' compensation claims for the State Department of Consumer and Business Services. My work is important to injured workers, insurers, businesses and other agencies that rely on our accurate data to help improve health and safety for all workers and control costs for business.

I like my job, but I am hardly overpaid. After 18 years, my regular pay is \$38,800 plus a 5 percent lead-worker differential minus unpaid furloughs. In fact, 60 percent of Oregon's state and university workers earn less than \$40,000, and 28 percent earn less than \$30,000, qualifying some state workers with families for food stamps.

Given those wages, our health and retirement benefits are not excessive. They reflect a conscious — and responsible — choice on our part to accept more compensation in benefits than cash.

Pension benefits were reduced significantly in 2003, and I suspect PERS would not be an issue but for how fast and loose Wall Street played with the economy, causing "The Great Recession" and eating into our retirement reserves. How fair is it for us to pay twice for what greedy bankers did?

The governor acknowledged Friday that nobody is better at containing health-care costs than the State Public Employees' Benefits Board — and in almost the same breath said state workers ought to be pay a share of future premiums so we will be motivated to contain costs — even though our reduced salaries amount to a contribution to health coverage already.

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