

[Print Article](#)[Print This Story](#)

State workers decry pension change as slap against poor

By LINDSAY PETERSON | The Tampa Tribune

Gov. Rick Scott called attention to the state's largess last month when he launched a website listing state workers with pensions of more than \$100,000 a year.

The launch came as lawmakers began debating whether state workers should start paying into their public pension plans, to the tune of about 3 percent of their annual salary under one proposal.

Scott says taxpayers need to see where their money is going. State worker Mike Ebersole agrees, but suggests taxpayers also need to see the number of people at the bottom of the pay scale.

"I work with people who are on welfare because they don't make enough," Ebersole said. "And now they're going to make even less."

The lower end of the pay scale is where you'll find most state workers.

Of 105,000 included in a recent analysis, more than 32,000 made less than \$30,000 a year. More than 74,000, about 79 percent, made less than \$40,000.

Only about 5,200 made more than \$70,000 a year.

The analysis was conducted by state Sen. Charlie Dean, an Ocala Republican

* * * * *

"It's going to cripple a lot of us" on the lower end, said Shawn Brennan, a North Port city maintenance worker who supports a wife and two children on about \$44,000 a year.

The Florida House passed a bill earlier this month requiring workers to contribute 3 percent of their pay to their state pensions. The Senate created a tiered plan, at Dean's prompting, starting at 2 percent for people making less than \$25,000 and rising to 6 percent for those who make \$50,000 or more.

Scott is pushing for 5 percent.

The two chambers have about two weeks to agree on a plan.

The deduction would apply to about 655,000 workers for the state and other agencies, schools, cities, counties, that are part of the state pension system.

The House bill also would close the Deferred Retirement Option Program, or DROP, to new participants and increase the retirement age for enrollees after July 1, 2011. It would save taxpayers more than \$1 billion and go a long way toward closing a nearly \$4 billion state budget gap.

Neither the House nor the Senate has addressed whether more state workers would become eligible for

welfare as their pay goes down.

At the other end of the pay scale, the University of South Florida pays the highest proportion of six-figure salaries among 80 public agencies in Tampa Bay featured on the Tribune's database, "Who's On Your Payroll?"

Of every 1,000 workers at USF, 94 make \$100,000 or more.

Still, thousands of full-time workers at USF make less than \$30,000 a year. These include the secretaries, custodians and landscapers who work in the shadow of the professors and doctors at USF, said Bill McClellan, president of the staff union.

"Many of our lower paid employees qualify for welfare and food stamps right now," he said. "They're trying to raise families" on \$18,000 to \$25,000 a year.

"How do they do it? They work two, three jobs," McClellan said.

* * * * *

Last year, for the first time in several years, USF staff workers got a raise ⁰⁰/₁₀₀ 1.5 percent. But they stand to lose all of that, and more, in the pension legislation.

The \$25,000 a year worker would lose \$500 a year under the Senate plan, \$750 under the House and \$1,250 if Scott gets his way.

As states across the country struggle to balance gaping budget deficits, many are fighting over public pension reform. And the discourse has produced conflicting assessments of who is better off ⁰⁰/₁₀₀ the public worker or the private worker.

The Cato Institute reported last year that public workers made at least \$10 an hour more than private workers, counting pay and benefits. At the same time, a report from the Center for State and Local Government Excellence said public workers make less than private workers, considering factors such as education and type of job.

But on the Florida House floor, when lawmakers debated earlier this month, the main issue was how much Florida could afford.

The state has paid state worker pensions since 1975, said state Rep. Rich Workman, a Melbourne Republican and sponsor of the House pension bill.

"We find ourselves in the unfortunate position of no longer being able to shoulder 100 percent of the burden," Workman said.

Florida is one of only a handful of states that doesn't require a pension contribution from workers, said Rep. Debbie Mayfield, a Vero Beach Republican.

"This is far better than deeper cuts to basic government," Mayfield said.

* * * * *

Democrats who opposed the change argued money, too, but focused on what would be coming out of workers' paychecks.

Florida public workers already make less than many in other states because of agreements made years ago to forgo raises in exchange for the state pension support, said Rep. Luis Garcia, a Miami Democrat.

"We entered into a contract," Garcia said. "To do this would be a breach of faith."

A state nurse making \$22,000 a year will see \$660 a year less in her paycheck, said state Rep. Jeff Clemens, a Lake Worth Democrat.

"That's food for her kids for a couple of months."

Supporters rejected the charge that they were going after the state's lowest paid workers.

"We're not balancing the budget on the backs of anyone," said state Rep. Seth McKeel, a Lakeland Republican. "We're balancing the budget, and that's our job."

But the bite will be real to Brennan.

If the House plan goes through, the 42-year-old North Port maintenance worker will receive \$110 less every month, he said, which will make it even harder to find the \$500 a month he pays for a family health insurance policy.

"My family may have to go without health insurance," he said. "I don't have anywhere else to cut."

* * * * *

Three percent may not sound like a lot, he said, but it cuts deep in a low-income family.

"They're affecting families all the way down the road."

Ebersole, 42, who works with the state Department of Transportation in Sarasota, is in a better financial spot than Brennan. He and his wife, also a state worker, have a 9-year-old daughter and make about \$75,000 a year.

But Ebersole is angry.

"Everyone thinks we make all this money," he said, but he hasn't had a raise in six years.

"No bonus. No pay for performance, but our insurance keeps going up, gas is going up, food is going up."

"I'd like to know what the big corporations are doing to pull their weight."

If the House plan goes through, Ebersole and his wife will see their income drop by about \$190 a month.

He's not sure what he'll cut from the family budget. Girl Scouts for his daughter? The occasional dinner at Stacey's Buffet?

Brennan wonders if lawmakers have considered what will happen to the state's economy when people quit going out to dinner and buying the little extras.

"When you don't have much, that's what you do," he said. "But when you start crunching us, we stop spending."

lpeterson@tamptrib.com

(813) 259-7834