



## Pay freeze debate runs hot in San Diego

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To some San Diegans, Monday's proposal by President Barack Obama to freeze federal workers' pay for the next two years represented an all too modest first step toward tackling a national debt now pegged at \$14 trillion.

To others, it would mean economic pain to people who deserve better.

Either way, the proposal's implications are vast. Some 2 million federal workers across the nation, including more than 44,000 in San Diego County, could see their pay stagnate over the next two years.

The move, which must be approved by Congress, would save billions of dollars in what was seen an effort by the Obama administration to seize the deficit-cutting initiative from Republicans with a sudden, dramatic stroke.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, the top Republican on the House Oversight Committee, called the proposal necessary and "long overdue," saying the president and congressional leaders should take additional steps to reduce spending.

But Cris D. Soulia, a transportation security officer at Lindbergh Field and president of the American Federation of Government Employees, Local 1234, said that while he understood the need to reduce the deficit, "hitting low-paid federal employees in the pocket is not the way to do it."

Lorena Gonzalez, the secretary-treasurer of the San Diego and Imperial Counties Labor Council, which represents about 9,000 federal workers, said the government's focus should be on investing in job creation, "not undermining the ones that put food on the table for local families."

The pay freeze would not apply to the military, but it would affect all others on the Executive Branch payroll, including civilians working in the Department of Defense. It would not affect members of Congress or their staffs, defense contractors, postal workers or federal court judges and workers.

"Small businesses and families are tightening their belts," Obama said in brief remarks at the White House. "The government should, too."

Obama's move was an attempt to get in front of Republican plans to slash federal pay and the workforce next year, when they will flex more legislative muscle than now. It came a day ahead of Obama's

meeting at the White House with both Republicans and Democratic leaders — his first with Republicans since the midterm elections — and two days before the deadline for recommendations by his deficit-reduction commission.

The president said the economy and federal spending were at the top of the agenda for today's meeting, one he said he hoped "will mark a first step towards a new and productive working relationship" between the two parties. Because of GOP midterm gains, "we now have a shared responsibility to deliver for the American people on the issues that define not only these times but our future," Obama said.

House Republican leader John Boehner of Ohio, on track to become House speaker in January, said he was pleased with the president's announcement.

"Republicans and Democrats don't have to wait until January to cut spending and stop all the tax hikes. We can — and should — start right now," Boehner said in a statement. He also suggested that Obama was taking a page from the GOP playbook.

The freeze would take effect on Jan. 1, assuming the lame-duck Congress approves the move by the end of this year. The 2012 pay freeze will be included by Obama as part of his fiscal 2012 budget submission to Congress, due early next year.

In the past, Congress has generally gone along with presidential recommendations on federal worker pay levels.

Without congressional action, federal employees would automatically get a 0.9 percent increase under the formula set by a 1990 law. They received a 1.9 percent pay increase this year.

According to The New York Times, a report in June by Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute, a libertarian research organization in Washington, found that federal civilian workers had an average annual wage of \$81,258 in 2009, compared with \$50,464 for the nation's private-sector workers. Average federal salaries rose 58 percent from 2000 to 2009, compared with 30 percent in the private sector.

Union leaders, though, cited other data showing that federal workers were paid 24 percent less than their private sector counterparts, according to the Times.

Polls show rising public anger toward the federal government at a time of high continued unemployment and Wall Street and auto bailouts.

Federal workers have been less directly affected by the recession than other sectors, with fewer layoffs and continued annual pay increases. Republican and fiscal conservative critics have argued that federal employees are better paid than private-sector counterparts, although public workers' unions dispute this.

Local tea party activist Leslie Eastman of Tierrasanta said she didn't think the proposal went nearly far enough toward cutting into the budget deficit.

"Don't get me wrong, it's a nice start," said Eastman, who helped found a group called the Southern California Tax Revolt Coalition last year. But even with the proposal in place, she said she thought "loopholes" would remain for federal employees to get pay increases.

"I suspect that it's trying to show that the Obama administration has somewhat received the message

from the historic sweep into the House of Representatives,” she said. “But it’s not going to stop the tea party groups from being active, nor from monitoring the Republicans on what they’re doing.”

Lani Lutar, the president and CEO of the San Diego County Taxpayers Association, said that at the state and local government level, workers have already had to take furloughs and in some cases pay cuts.

“I think the more that the public sees that these type of decisions are being made at the federal level of government, there’s going to be an expectation that the local government does the same,” she said, adding that it would add to the public pressure on local officials.

Government “shouldn’t be insulated from the difficult decisions that need to be made,” she said.

The city of San Diego has been trying to keep salaries in line for a while now as it grapples with financial crisis stemming from past increases to pension benefits and the nationwide recession. Union workers haven’t received a raise for several years and took a 6 percent cut in pay and benefits in 2009. The coming round of labor negotiations is expected to keep salaries at their current level.

In Washington, Obama indicated there were other belt-tightening steps ahead. “We’re going to have to make some additional very tough decisions that this town has put off for a very long time,” he said. At the same time, noting continued economic weakness, Obama said, “We can’t put the brakes on too quickly” because of the still-fragile economy.

Staff writers Michele Clock, Craig Gustafson, Robert J. Hawkins, and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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