

MPs defend salary, allowance hike

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Staff Reporter

York Region MPs say they're certainly entitled to a fatter pay cheque, with some arguing they're still underpaid compared to politicians in other countries.

In fact, most called their pay hike quite "modest," considering the high costs that come with the job, and don't understand why the move is being criticized.

Under the new pay package approved Friday, MPs will get a two-per-cent raise on their base salaries each year over the next four years.

They will also get an increase in their \$21,300 tax-free allowance and their housing allowance immediately doubles to \$12,000.

With the increase, MPs will earn the equivalent of \$140,000, if it was fully taxed, up from the current value of \$119,000. Cabinet ministers will see their pay jump from the equivalent of \$167,600 to \$192,300.

But Oak Ridges Liberal MP Bryon Wilfert explained MPs won't take home anywhere near \$140,000 because of their expenses, adding Canadian MP salaries are still ranked only ninth in the world.

"We haven't had a pay increase since 1991, and we only make 37 per cent of what U.S. congressmen make," Wilfert said.

"I guess you get what you pay for."

He added the beefed up housing allowance is particularly important, noting the previous allowance only amounted to about \$50 a day. MPs were previously given a \$6,000 housing allowance.

"It's hard to find a hotel room and dinner for \$50 a night," Wilfert said.

Thornhill Liberal MP Elinor Caplan also called the increase "modest," adding it should reflect society today.

"The days of having only the wealthy participate in politics are gone," she said.

"Although, I know there are some people who don't think MPs should get paid at all."

Although Caplan knew what the job paid when she ran for her seat last year, she said has a more realistic view now that she's in the position.

"Commuting is very expensive," she said.

Markham Tory MP Jim Jones noted he has often had to pay expenses out of his own pocket.

Although he supports the pay increase because it's in line with what was given to other public servants, he suggested it would have been better if it had been approved before last year's election.

"I think the vote should be taken a year before the election, to be in place for the next parliament," he said.

But the salary increase isn't really an issue — it probably won't even notice it after taxes.

York North Liberal MP Karen Kraft Sloan noted the increase is actually less than those often approved for the private sector, adding the raise shouldn't be criticized because MPs' salaries have been frozen for so long.

Kraft Sloan added she won't take

advantage of a clause in the deal allowing her to opt back into the pension plan, maintaining she'll stand by her previous decision to not accept the plan.

"It was a personal decision to opt out of the pension plan... I live by the personal decisions I make," she said, calling Reform MPs who asked for the clause to be inserted "hypo-

critical."

They've reneged on their previously publicized opposition to the pension plan."

However, under the new deal, MPs who have opted out of the pension plan will now get a severance package when they quit or are defeated.

Some Reform MPs have criticized the pay raise, stating they'll donate their por-

tion to charity.

And Liberal MP Guy St-Julien has informed the Commons pay office to deduct his raise and use it to help pay off the national debt.



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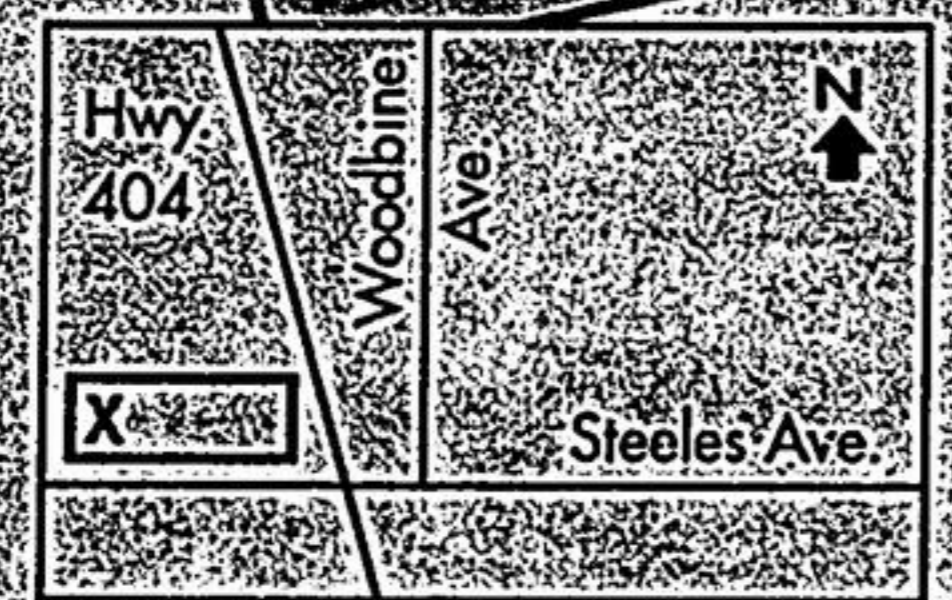
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