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Senate Democratic Caucus endorses judicial pay increase

ATLANTA – The state Senate Democratic Caucus has announced its support of legislation that would provide the first substantial increase for Georgia’s state-compensated judges since 1999. House Bill 119 is pending legislation in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Sen. Tim Golden (D-Valdosta), the caucus chairman, said Senate Democrats are expressing their support for the bill not as a partisan issue but because for Georgia to continue to attract and retain the most qualified judges, a salary increase is long overdue.

“The legislation is already supported by many of our Republican colleagues,” Golden said. “We are simply offering to work with them and Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle in a bipartisan manner to reduce the gap between our judicial salaries and those of lawyers in private practice or law school professors. For our courts to dispense justice effectively, our judges’ compensation must at least be competitive.”

HB 119 was introduced in 2007, after the State Bar of Georgia’s Commission on Judicial Service reported the findings of its study comparing judicial salaries with those in the private sector and those for professors in Georgia’s law schools.

“The report of the commission, chaired by former state House Majority Leader Larry Walker, revealed an alarming disparity in compensation,” said Sen. Michael Meyer von Bremen (D-Albany), chairman of the Senate Special Judiciary Committee. “For example, the salaries that some Atlanta firms are offering first-year associates, fresh out of law school, are higher than the base salary the state is paying Superior Court judges. And lawyers with five to eight years of experience are making significantly more than state Court of Appeals judges and Supreme Court justices.”

As originally written, HB 119 would implement the Commission on Judicial Service recommendation of a 20 percent across-the-board increase for Superior Court and Court of Appeals judges and Supreme Court justices. The House of Representatives passed a reduced version at the end of the 2007 session.

“We are in favor of restoring the increases to an appropriate level and enabling our justice system to continue to be led by the state’s best and brightest legal minds,” said Sen. Robert Brown (D-Macon). “After nine years, we cannot let this gap widen even further.”

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