

JPs get \$20,500 retroactive raise

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Ontario's justices of the peace are worth every penny of a \$20,500 retroactive raise each one is getting following the recommendations of an independent commission, Attorney General Chris Bentley said today.

The commission recommended the salary of justices of the peace rise from \$88,500 currently to \$109,000 in 2007, saying they play an important role in the justice system, from signing arrest warrants to considering bail.

"This is a role that cannot be lightly undertaken," states the commission's report, dated last year but just quietly released by the government. "There must be respect for this role in the community. There cannot be any thought that justices of the peace could be influenced in their work either by threats or bribes from individual criminals or organized crime groups.

"The income of justices of the peace must be such that they can disdain and dismiss any offers of bribes."

Although it's going to cost the government \$7 million in back pay, Bentley said the government accepts that recommendation and called it money well spent.

"It's a very important function that our justices of the peace perform," Bentley said, adding the province has hired 73 new justices of the peace to the bench.

"They're on the front lines of the justice system whether it's in the criminal courts determining ... whether somebody gets detained or not in custody, or in provincial offence courts dealing with a number of the very serious matters in every community in our province."

But the province didn't agree to all the commission's recommendations, Bentley added. The commission said justices of the peace need five more vacation days each year to "keep pace with their increased workload and the importance of their work."

The province has rejected that, Bentley said.

Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory said he doesn't object to the pay hike since it was scrutinized and drawn up by an independent commission. Having spent a day recently in bail court, Tory said justices of the peace are expected to make tough decisions.

"You want to make sure that you're paying them equitably relative to other people in the judicial system and relative to what they're doing," Tory said, adding the raise looks big because the justices haven't had an increase in several years.

"Sometimes when you go too long without a proper adjustment done by an independent group, it looks worse in terms of the adjustment when it happens."

New Democrat Peter Kormos said he doesn't object to the raise either, but the government should do more to ensure justices of the peace aren't just patronage appointments.

"What it means now is that we have to expect more of our JPs – fewer flunkies being appointed as mere political hacks," Kormos said.

"The quality of JPs in Ontario currently ranges from very, very good to – quite frankly – abysmal. With appropriate salaries, I think we should be able to expect that JPs will be uniformly professional, skilled and judicious."