

Grumet: No pay bump since 2001? Retired Texas government workers deserve updated pensions



Bridget Grumet

Austin American-Statesman

Published 7:00 a.m. CT April 9, 2023

I wish state lawmakers used the weight rooms and the basketball courts at the YMCA in Southwest Austin.

If they did, they'd pass by Barbara Fetonte, a smiling lady who works at the front desk. They'd see a 70-year-old woman who just took that part-time job because her state pension hasn't gone up since she retired 12 years ago — even as the cost of everything else has.

Fetonte is frugal. She still mows her own lawn. She recently cut her landline telephone and cable TV to save money. Her life and her finances changed when her husband passed away last October.

Perhaps if lawmakers met someone like her, they would think differently about Texas' \$33 billion surplus and all of the big promises of historic tax cuts — mirages of abundance in a state that hasn't given its retired government workers a cost-of-living adjustment in more than two decades, even as lawmakers have increased their own pensions twice in that time.

“Our work is not as visible,” Fetonte said, “even though the work we do touches everyone in some way.”

“They just kind of keep getting on the backburner,” added Tyler Sheldon, the legislative director for the Texas State Employees Union. “Every session, it's ‘Next session, next session,’ and there's never a session that ends up fully addressing the needs of state retirees.”

More than 122,000 retirees draw pensions from ERS. We're talking about people who once served as child protection workers, food stamp coordinators, prison guards, highway maintenance crew members and construction supervisors. Fetonte worked for 25 years at the Texas Workforce Commission, helping people get unemployment benefits when they found themselves between jobs.

Why don't these retirees get the same consideration as retired teachers, who are rightly getting an increase in their monthly pensions this session?

Shortchanging state workers

Fully funding a 10% cost-of-living adjustment for these retirees would cost about \$4.2 billion, Sheldon said. A more modest option, providing a one-time 13th check, would cost around \$250 million.

Again, Texas is sitting on a \$33 billion surplus, with plans to hand out roughly \$17 billion in property tax relief.

In previous sessions, some lawmakers indicated they couldn't afford to boost retirees' pay. "But now with a budget surplus, if they don't provide something for ERS retirees (this year), it really shows that that's not what they want to do," Sheldon said.

I should add: It's rare for retirees anywhere to go decades without a bump in their pension. About three-fourths of the pension plans sponsored by state and local governments have automatic cost-of-living adjustments built in, according to the [National Association of State Retirement Administrators](#).

So far, Texas GOP leadership hasn't called for updating these pension payments. But some lawmakers would support doing so. [Rep. Alma Allen](#) and [Sen. Borris Miles](#), both Houston Democrats, and Austin Democrat [Rep. John Bucy III](#) filed bills this session to increase pension payments. [Sen. Royce West](#), D-Dallas, proposed a 13th check. Rep. Jarvis Johnson, D-Houston, [cited the lack of a pension boost](#) among the reasons he voted against the proposed House budget in committee.

Joan Barasch and other retirees working with the Texas State Employees Union have been visiting lawmakers' offices, dropping off fact sheets and making their case. Barasch said the officials who represent her — Rep. Sheryl Cole and Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, both Austin Democrats — were supportive. At other lawmakers' offices, she said, staffers politely accept the information.

And then, nothing.

"They seem to have sort of a pride in *not* spending it," Barasch said of the record surplus our state has amassed while a laundry list of needs [goes unmet](#).

Barasch, 66, spent three decades working at the Health and Human Services Commission, helping families who needed Medicaid, cash assistance or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps.

Attesting to the state's austerity, Barasch said, "I can tell you that I certified my share of state employees who were eligible for SNAP benefits."

She retired in 2019 and is grateful for her \$2,600-a-month pension, knowing the average check for older retirees is [closer to \\$1,800 a month](#). Still, she's worried about rising costs overtaking her fixed income.

“All you want to do is lead that same life again,” said Fetonte, whose \$2,200-a-month pension would need to be closer to \$3,000 to keep pace with inflation. “You don’t want to be nickel-and-diming yourself.”

The Texas House passed a state budget proposal last week that included much-needed pay raises for current state employees and teachers, as well as boosted pensions for retired educators — but no increases for the retired state workers relying on the Employees Retirement System of Texas. Those retirees' pension payments haven't budged since 2001.

And yes, judges and lawmakers should have compensation that keeps up with rising costs. Shouldn't lawmakers ensure the same for the retirees who spent their careers providing the bread-and-butter services of state government?

For months, state leaders have talked about the opportunity to make historic investments with Texas' budget surplus. But these dollars also have a truth-serum effect, showing what really matters to government leaders when a lack of funding is no longer a problem.

Lawmakers still have time to do right by state retirees. I hope they do.

Grumet is the Statesman's Metro columnist. Her column, ATX in Context, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at bgrumet@statesman.com or via Twitter at [@bgrumet](https://twitter.com/bgrumet). Find her previous work at statesman.com/news/columns.