



Retirement News Highlights

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Cap on pensions, salaries is raised

Measure passed with 5-2 vote by Baltimore County Council

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The Baltimore County Council voted Tuesday evening to raise the maximum cap on council member pensions to up to 70% beginning in 2023.

At present, pensions for those who sit on the council max out at 60% of their salary.

Members of the County Council enjoy benefits equal to 5% of their salary for each year they serve. They contribute 13.68% of their salary.

The bill as it was originally introduced would have completely removed the cap on council members' pensions, allowing them to receive retirement benefits equal to their full salary after serving for 20 years.

Council Chair Julian E. Jones Jr., a Democrat, introduced an amendment Tuesday to change the maximum cap to 70% for members who have served 16 or more years, making the bill more palatable to skeptical members.

The cap will remain 60% for those who serve up to three terms. The new policy won't go into effect until after the next council is sworn in.

"I think the new language for the pension makes more sense," council member Tom Quirk, a Democrat, said ahead of the amendment vote.

"I think we don't want to incentivize people to be lifers on the council to get 100% of their pension."

The amendment and bill passed on a 5-2 vote, with council members Cathy Bevins, a Democrat, and Todd K. Crandell, a Republican, opposing both.

The bill also included a salary increase for council members.

Beginning in December the council president will make \$77,000, and other members will make \$69,000. This is the first pay increase for the council since 2014.

A separate bill was approved Tuesday to increase the county executive's salary by \$17,000 to \$192,000 beginning in December.

Legislation was passed in 2009 setting the 60% cap on pensions following public criticism that then-Councilman Vince Gardina, a Democrat, could retire at age 54 and collect retirement benefits equal to his full salary for life.

Gardina, who served five four-year terms, is the longest-serving member of the Baltimore County Council.

When the council passed the pension cap, the bill was written in a way that it would affect only future members. The cap didn't go into effect until 2010.

Bevins asked why the pension cap had become an issue 12 years after its implementation.

"The little deed that was done in 2009, I was aware of that and I thought it was unfair, but I still ran for office," she said. "We knew that the limit was put on us and everybody before us got it, so it's like the reverse here.

"Why are we so worried about the next body? Let the next body worry about the next body."

Jones said he "is trying to clean up" policies he thinks are unfair and is committed to reworking the way that the pension system for the council is decided.

"I don't think it's fair what was done," Bevins said, "but we've let 12 years go by and no one has said a word in 12 years. And all of a sudden it's so important."

While some council members say that they work full-time hours, a seat on the County Council is considered a part-time job. County employees do not have a pension cap.

Crandell said that there is "a fundamental flaw in the job description, and the salary and benefits package that is offered for that particular job," because it doesn't account for all of the time spent on community advocacy, constituent services and studying policy ahead of sessions.

"I think that that is not something that can be fixed by this piece of legislation," Crandell said. "It has to be fixed by the charter."

[Back to top](#)