

House Votes To Continue Federal Worker Pay Freeze

BY JIM ABRAMS
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday voted to freeze the wages of federal workers for a third straight year and put members of Congress on record as opposing a boost in their \$174,000 annual salaries.

Republican supporters said their measure, which would freeze federal worker wages through 2013, would save taxpayers \$26 billion. It would not apply to military personnel.

The nation's 2.3 million federal civilian workers currently are in the second year of a wage freeze imposed as part of efforts to trim budget deficits. Sponsors said the two-year halt in wage increases will save the government \$60 billion.

"We must act now to extend the pay freeze on federal workers and on members' salaries until Washington finally gets its finances under control," said Rep. Sean Duffy, R-Wis., the bill's sponsor.

Republicans also have sought to add a year to the federal wage freeze and have federal workers contribute more toward pensions as ways to pay for legislation, now being negotiated between the House and Senate, to extend a payroll tax cut and federal unemployment benefits until the end of this year.

The pay freeze legislation could have difficulty moving through the Democratic-controlled Senate. In the House, most Democrats opposed the measure, saying deficit reduction should not be carried out on the backs of federal workers. Federal labor groups have strongly opposed an extended freeze.

Still, it was a tough

election-year vote for some Democrats reluctant to be seen as supporting a raise for themselves. The salary of rank-and-file members of Congress has remained at \$174,000 since 2009 and is unlikely to go up as long as the economy sputters.

"What we have here is a very clever political effort to have members vote either for their pay or against their pay being adjusted," said Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, the second-ranking Democrat.

Democrats tried to bring up a separate bill that would have stated opposition to a congressional pay hike, but they were stopped by Republicans. The vote on the pay freeze bill was 309-117, with 72 out of 187 voting Democrats supporting it. Only two Republicans opposed it.

President Barack Obama has proposed ending the pay freeze in 2013, but with a modest 0.5 percent raise.

But Republicans pointed to a Congressional Budget Office report earlier this week that concluded that federal workers, on average, receive total compensation that is 16 percent higher than what their counterparts in the private sector get.

The study found that while federal workers earn about 2 percent more than comparable private sector workers, generous federal pension and other benefit programs boost that difference to 16 percent.

"Those who work hardest to pay taxes are the ones bearing the burden of a bloated federal government," said Rep. Dennis Ross of Florida, like Duffy a Republican freshman. "The contrast between federal government and private sector is troubling."

Veteran

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Those who know him say he didn't mind letting his Pearl Harbor experience define him, especially after his retirement. One could sense, they all say, that he wanted to make sure that people never forget the sacrifices that all veterans, especially those who suffered and died 70 years ago at Hawaii, have made to protect the nation's freedom.

Fuller, who served on the Vermillion City Council in the 1980s, is happy to have a memento from Christopherson hanging on the wall in his home.

"Darrel had a hobby of woodworking, and when I left the City Council in 1990, I was presented with an appreciation gift," Fuller said. "It is a clock that Darrel had mounted in a wooden plaque that was cut in the outline of the state of South Dakota. I have had that hanging in my house ever since, and it really serves as a reminder of two things — my service on the city council, but more importantly, my friendship and association with Darrel."

Fuller said Christopherson possessed a unique gift. "He really had a way of connecting with people," he said. "I do remember him mentioning the number of times he had visited the schools and talked to the kids about his experiences at Pearl Harbor. That was another side of him. He was pretty talented."

Christopherson was only 17 years old when he joined the Navy in February 1941.

"All I thought about was joining the Navy to see the world. I had no idea we'd be involved in a war within a year," he told the *Plain Talk* on a story published on Dec. 7, 2001, the 60th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack.

He was onboard the *USS Vestal*, a Navy repair ship that was moored to the *USS Arizona*, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Christopherson was in sick bay as the attack began.

"We heard the aircraft buzzing the bay," he said. "We looked through the portholes and as soon as they flew over, we could see the red ball under the wings and we knew they were Japanese planes."

The 600-foot *Vestal* was hit twice by armor-piercing bombs.

As a fire raged in the storeroom, Christopherson was one of the crew members who worked to put it out.

During one of the blasts, the *Vestal's* skipper, Captain Cassin Young, was thrown overboard. The executive officer then gave the order to abandon ship.

"But our captain was able to swim back and once he was back on board and heard the executive officer's order, he said 'Abandon ship — hell! We're going to get under way!'"

It took the *Vestal's* crew about 15 minutes to cut the cables that had attached them to the *Arizona*, which was under heavy bombardment and eventually sank with more than 1,000 sailors on board. The *Vestal* then crossed the channel and was run aground at Aiea Landing.

"The *Vestal* wasn't a combat ship, so we weren't a target," Christopherson said. "They didn't bother us once we got away from the *Arizona*."

But all Christopherson and the *Vestal* crew could do was watch the horrible destruction taking place at Pearl Harbor.

"Everyone who goes into the military service knows that at anytime they can be put in harm's way," he said.

After serving 20 years in the Navy, Christopherson returned to his hometown, and was a longtime member of the city police

department.

His retirement years were busy times, as he devoted himself to telling of his own unique military experiences and the importance of patriotism to practically anyone who would listen. He regularly spoke to students and radio audiences. He was interviewed by numerous newspapers, maintained an active role in the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association and appeared on two South Dakota Public Television programs, including the highly acclaimed "Pearl Harbor Survivors: South Dakota Stories."

Regular listeners to Christopherson's story over the years have been the members of Cinda Passick's second grade class. He first began visiting with her students over a decade ago, when her classroom was located in Austin Elementary. The students' experience with him often would involve walking the few blocks to the Clay County Veterans Memorial, located on the grounds of the county courthouse.

"We formed a partnership with him when we were at Austin School," Passick said. "The second graders could walk down to the courthouse, and we had him come and talk about being a veteran. We always tried to do this around Veterans Day — sometimes, it was right on Veterans Day. And we had him share the story of the monument, and how it was created, and his involvement there."

His immense impact on Vermillion's young people is difficult to measure.

"I was just talking with another second grade teacher, and we weren't able to get him to speak to the students this year," Passick said. "But otherwise, he's talked to every one of our students who was in second grade, from now up to the seniors at the high school."

Clay County Sheriff Andy Howe remembers that Christo-

pherson was instrumental in garnering community support to help the memorial become a reality. It was dedicated on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2000.

Howe's relationship with Christopherson continued through the years. Both are military veterans and members of the local VFW post. "He was post commander for, I think, two years. He was commander before I was."

"He loved to speak, and he would talk to the school kids," he said. "Darrel would speak to them about patriotism and flag etiquette, and when we would do our monthly or quarterly reports on community service activities, we would always ask, 'Ok, Darrel, who did you talk to this time?'" He was always invited to speak, and he was always willing."

As the number of World War II veterans continues to dwindle, Passick observed that Christopherson looked at his unique role as a veteran and survivor as something to celebrate.

"It was so valuable for us to be able to talk with him, and learn about that firsthand," she said.

Added Fuller: "I'm just delighted that he got to visit Pearl one more time. If there is a life to be celebrated, it had to be Darrel's."

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