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PA flip-flop halts execs' pay-raise gravy train

By Fredric U. Dicker in Albany and Douglas Wight in New York

The Port Authority beat a hasty retreat late yesterday from what appeared to be a sweeping set of newly authorized huge pay hikes for its top executives.

After initially confirming a report in The Star-Ledger of Newark that PA executives would be granted raises as high as 22 percent, a spokesman for the joint New York-New Jersey agency said last night it was all a misunderstanding.

PA spokesman Alan Morrison did confirm newly named Executive Director Joseph Seymour had been granted a 22 percent pay hike at a Thursday meeting, but that no other increases were approved.

And while he said PA commissioners "heard a report" on recommended pay hikes for other employees from an outside consultant, he insisted "the commissioners took no action" on the report.

However, just hours earlier, another PA spokesman, Steve Coleman, told The Post the across-the-board raises had been approved.

Meanwhile, Gov. Pataki, who earlier in the day insisted he didn't know any of the details of the reported pay hikes, said a few hours later that he wouldn't approve raises for anybody but Seymour.

"We are facing very difficult economic times and the need for all of us to tighten our belts and to consider massive pay raises like this at the Port Authority is wrong and it's not going to happen," said Pataki.

Pataki named Seymour, the former head of the state Power Authority, to head the Port Authority Thursday, and just hours later his salary was set at $225,000 a year.

Seymour's predecessor, Neil Levin — who was killed in the Sept. 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center — had earned $185,000 a year.

Pataki spokesman Michael McKeon insisted Seymour wasn't really getting a pay hike because he was a "new hire" at the Port Authority.

The PA's seemingly rapid retreat from planned broad-based pay hikes came just hours after the action was denounced by state Comptroller Carl McCall, who is seeking the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, and Change-NY, a conservative-oriented statewide anti-tax organization.

"At a time when New York City, New York state and New Jersey are facing budget gaps and rougher fiscal times, it is inappropriate, to say the least, for the Port Authority to be dramatically increasing salaries for its senior management," McCall said.

Change-NY had also called the reported pay hikes "lavish raises being given at a time when the governor has warned everybody that we're in severe fiscal times."

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