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New Haven mayoral candidate says he'd take pay cut, decline pension, health benefits

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NEW HAVEN — One mayoral candidate says if he is elected, he will slash the mayor's salary and decline pension and health benefits — all to save taxpayers some dough.

Local budget watchdog Jeffrey Kerekes has vowed, if elected, to cut his compensation in half from what Mayor John DeStefano Jr. receives from the city. The current budget shows DeStefano earns \$127,070 annually.

If you add pension and health care benefits, Kerekes estimates the total compensation package tops \$175,000. That estimate is based on city data that shows employees earn pension and health benefits worth about 40 to 50 percent of their salaries.

Kerekes said he would settle for a salary of \$75,000, with no pension and health benefits.

"I want to make it clear the city has to start saving money, and one way to demonstrate that is to take a pay cut of my own," Kerekes said Tuesday.

He called the mayor's compensation package "excessive," particularly in a time of great economic need for many taxpayers and city workers.

By comparison, Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch will earn \$126,538 this year, and Stamford Mayor Michael Pavia will earn \$153,086.

DeStefano's campaign spokesman, Danny Kedem, responded to Kereke's idea by saying the city needs "real solutions," not "gimmicks."

Kedem noted the mayor has taken the lead on cutting compensation by forgoing \$5,000 in longevity pay this year, and taking a salary cut worth almost \$4,000 in the 2009-10 budget. Next year, the mayor will be paid the same salary he has earned the past two years.

Kedem said the best way to prevent long-term budget problems "is to make city pension and health care benefits more in line with the private sector," which DeStefano has been pushing for in labor contract negotiations.

DeStefano's other Democratic challengers weighed in on Kerekes' idea Tuesday. Local lawyer and community activist Clifton Graves said two weeks ago he proposed slashing salaries by 10 percent for the mayor and staff earning more than \$100,000 a year.

"Shared sacrifice means just that, shared sacrifice," he said.

Anthony Dawson, a former alderman and lieutenant at Yale-New Haven Hospital's Office of Protective Services, called Kerekes's proposed savings "small potatoes" compared to what he is looking into.

Dawson is looking for ways to save in litigation costs, which have cost the city \$17 million over the past five years, and fines related to school construction projects.

Robert Lee, another former alderman, said Kerekes' plan sounds like a good idea, but he wants to look into it more.

"My main concern is the violence that is going through the city and jobs for young people," he said.

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