

Legislation jump-starts a prosecutor's pension

Union's Romankow receives timely help

BY DUNSTAN McNICHOL
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

For 22 years, Westfield lawyer Theodore Romankow built up credits in the state retirement system from various part-time legal jobs. But the pension he qualified for wasn't much — a little more than \$1,000 a year.

That was two years ago.

Thanks to some timely help from two Union County lawmakers, Romankow, 63, will become eligible for an annual pension of \$91,500 next year.

Three things helped the Berkeley Heights Democrat's pension skyrocket:

■ Gov. James E. McGreevey

appointed him Union County prosecutor in 2002 with a \$141,000 yearly salary.

■ Ex-Sen. Joseph Suliga (D-Union) and Assemblyman Neil Cohen (D-Union) ushered through legislation that same year that allowed Romankow to qualify for a more lucrative pension plan.

■ Seven years of prior part-time employment with Cohen helped Romankow build up pension credits that will soon qualify him for additional benefits under the bill.

His abrupt change of fortune provides a dramatic illustration of the way the retirement system set

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PENSION

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Prosecutor's benefits skyrocket

up for New Jersey's public employees can be manipulated to provide handsome benefits to politically connected officials like Romankow, who come to full-time public service late in their professional careers.

"I didn't take the job for a pension," Romankow said. "I took it for other reasons."

Cohen disputes that the bill was tailored for Romankow, but Suliga, who is no longer in the state Senate, readily concedes the purpose of his bill was specifically to benefit Romankow.

"I looked at his situation and said, this doesn't make sense. I tried to limit it as much as I could," Suliga said. "He's going to leave private practice, give up private practice and become a prosecutor."

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FORMER SEN. JOSEPH SULIGA
(D-Union)

involved in Berkeley Heights politics and was a committeeman there in the 1980s. He has served as legal counsel for the Union County Utilities Authority and has performed legal work for Linden city government. In the early 1990s, he successfully represented Linden Mayor John Gregorio, who waged a legal battle to return to the political arena after being indicted, convicted and then pardoned on conspiracy charges stemming from his



2002 STAR-LEDGER FILE PHOTO

Theodore Romankow qualified for a little more than \$1,000 a year in the state retirement system from various part-time legal jobs over 22 years, prior to being named Union County prosecutor in 2002. Next year, he will become eligible for an annual pension of \$91,500.

hidden interest in two Linden go-go bars.

The growth of Romankow's public pension has its roots in a piece of legislation adopted in early 2002, which set up special retirement benefits for prosecutors.

Romankow, who was not appointed prosecutor until July 2002, missed by seven months the deadline the law set for being approved for those added benefits. Instead, he would have had to be content with a standard state employee's benefit package, worth tens of thousands less each year.

But in September 2002, Suliga introduced legislation that abolished the earlier deadline and cleared the way for Romankow and six other new appointees to enter the more lucrative retirement plan. Romankow was the clear winner in that group.

The bill passed in the summer of 2003, while lawmakers were considering the state budget. What Suliga's bill did was to allow Romankow to transfer the state pension credits he earned from his part-time work into the more lucrative pension system lawmakers had set up for county prosecutors and about 1,000 other law enforcement officers in the Attorney General's Office and county courthouse.

Under the new pension schedule, prosecutors who reach age 55, as Romankow had when the

bill was adopted, can retire and collect a pension worth at least one-half their final year's pay.

That means that as of last June, Romankow's pension had already jumped to a value of \$70,500 a year. Without Suliga's bill, his pension would have been worth only \$20,000 at the time.

The pension jumps to 65 percent if a prosecutor has put in 25 years of service. A standard state employee who works 25 years is entitled to a pension of 45.5 percent of their final pay.

Thanks to the years of part-time employment in Cohen's office, Romankow will reach the 25-year mark early next year. When he does, the value of his retirement package will jump by another \$21,150 a year.

Every additional year he remains in the prosecutor's job, Romankow's pension will grow to the tune of about \$1,400 per year.

Lawmakers are now considering other bills that would extend the elevated retirement benefits prosecutors now enjoy to at least two other groups of public employees — weights and measures officers and forensic scientists.

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