

Put down your coffee cup ... because you're gonna' choke when you read this money-grabbing scheme our elected "public servants" in Harrisburg have added more cash (swill) to the trough!

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Taxpayer-paid offer to retire State senators apparently were busy glad-handing and back-slapping one another over their latest incentive program to reduce Senate staffing levels, which supposedly is saving taxpayers \$1.8 million.

So, why don't we share their enthusiasm for the effort?

The Senate persuaded 47 of its staff members to retire, but at a cost. The employees, who were eligible to retire with full benefits anyway, were nonetheless given an additional sum of money -- up to \$40,000 -- to hang it up now.

As such, the potential savings to taxpayers were not as great as they could have been had the employees simply retired (or were furloughed).

The offer was available to any Senate staffer over the age of 60 with at least three years of state government service or anyone with 35 years of state service. They were eligible to receive \$1,000 for each year of service or one week's salary for each year of service, whichever is greater.

At least three staffers, including the Senate secretary/parliamentarian, received the maximum amount of \$40,000.

Forty-seven decided to accept the Senate's offer, but an equal number passed on it, apparently unsure what their job prospects would be in the real world.

The idea behind the incentive program is to eliminate positions -- a number of which pay more than a legislator's base salary of

\$82,000. But not all the positions are being eliminated.

For example, the secretary/parliamentarian, whose responsibilities include knowing the rules of the Senate, will be refilled.

So what's to prevent the Senate from refilling the rest when the economy rebounds and taxpayers aren't paying as close attention?

The Senate program was similar to one instituted last year by state Auditor General Jack Wagner, although it was much more generous than Wagner's.

Wagner's maximum incentive was \$25,000 -- the amount the state would have paid in jobless benefits for a furloughed employee. Fifty employees took Wagner up on his offer, cutting \$1.5 million from the auditor general's payroll costs.

Such incentive programs were common years ago when the economy was better. But they are practically unheard of in today's recession -- except in the public sector, of course.

Granted, the programs can save taxpayer money. But in the Senate's case, implementing the program is the easy part. The hard part is resisting the urge to refill the positions, and taxpayers have no assurances that that won't happen.