

Time to put the candidates on the record

Republican state Rep. Tom Creighton, who is on his way out of Harrisburg, raised the ire of many constituents for reneging on a campaign pledge to turn down a pension.

With less than two months until the April 24 primary, now seems like the perfect time to get the candidates seeking to replace him on the record, in their own words, about how they would handle the perks of serving in the Legislature.

We're talking about the car leases, per diems for meals, the generous health insurance program and pensions -- all on top of the \$82,296 base salary.

We'll check in with candidates for other offices later. For now, though, the only local primary contest is in Creighton's 37th Legislative District, which includes Manheim and northern Lancaster County.

There are three Republicans seeking the nomination: Stephen Black, Mindy Fee and Barry McFarland. The winner will face Democrat Russell Stahley, who is unopposed in the primary, in November.

Each of the candidates has sworn off the easy stuff -- the mileage reimbursements to and from Harrisburg, car leases and cellphone expenses.

But the bigger stuff -- the health care program and the legislative pension -- are tougher to decline.

Only McFarland and Stahley have said definitively that they wouldn't take a pension or health insurance.

"I don't believe these people deserve any special perks," McFarland said of lawmakers. "I just want to be treated like anybody else would in the workplace."

Black said he would swear off most perks of holding office if nominated and elected. But not all of them.

On his newly unveiled website this week, Black wrote, in part: "I will not take the taxpayer-paid car, per diems, cellphone, reimbursements for mileage or meals when traveling to and from Harrisburg -- because I want to serve you, not myself. I will also never vote for a salary increase."

He also vowed to "support efforts to cut the perks paid to all legislators."

Black told me that he would enroll in the state health insurance program, because, if elected, he would retire from his building firm to become a full-time legislator and be otherwise uninsured. He has not decided whether he would enroll in the taxpayer-funded pension program, he said, because "I don't know anything about it, or how it works."

On his website, though, Black says legislators "should have the same type of retirement plans we all do: 401(k) plans that require contributions from the employee instead of big, taxpayer-paid plans that set them up for life after just 10 years of work."

Fee said she would not enroll in the health care program because she does not need it; she and her children are covered under her late husband's benefits package. On the pension, though, she said: "It's not something I've even looked into yet." She would not rule out enrolling in the program.

She added in an email message: "I am not seeking this post to obtain attention and perks. I am running for this office to represent the people of the 37th District."

On mileage and car leases, she wrote: "My office does not pay for me to commute to and from work, just like most working people. If I work for the state, I do not feel the taxpayer should pay for my commute to work."

McFarland, a retired schoolteacher who already gets a pension, said he's running in part because the state is spending too much money on salaries and benefits for state lawmakers. He said he would accept a paycheck but give a "fair amount" to charity.

Stahley, a retired Methodist pastor, said he would turn down not just the perks and the pension but health care coverage. "I don't need it," he said, adding that he has both already. "For me, it would be just an honor to serve."

Stahley said he is disappointed in Creighton for reversing course on a pension. "Either you're a person of your word or you're not," he said.

Stahley, as retired clergy, is the obvious choice for least likely candidate to go back on his word. As he joked: "I'd better not. The doors of heaven just close if I do."