



Former governor Ryan loses pension, but gets to delay prison term

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SPRINGFIELD, ILL. — Former governor and convicted felon George Ryan must lose his entire \$197,000-a-year state pension because of his crimes of corruption against the government he once led, a state board ruled on Wednesday.

The 72-year-old Republican — who because of a court ruling Tuesday will get to remain free on bond while appealing his 6 1/2-year federal prison sentence — will challenge the pension board's decision in court, said his attorney, fellow former Gov. James R. Thompson.

Meanwhile, Ryan's pension remains frozen.

"You never want to kick someone when they're down ... but we have a responsibility to the taxpayers," said state Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington, part of the seven-member General Assembly Retirement System board that voted unanimously during a brief meeting in Springfield to officially deny Ryan any further pension payments.

The pension had been temporarily suspended since his criminal conviction in April.

Another board member, former Republican state Rep. Philip Collins, called the vote "the worst thing I've ever faced in my life," but he said state law left no choice. Collins, who served in the House while Ryan was speaker in the early 1980s, expressed "fervent hope the court overturns this."

Thompson — a Republican who was governor while Ryan was lieutenant governor in the 1980s, and now is his lawyer — promised an immediate appeal. "He is out of money," Thompson told The Associated Press.

He had argued that, since Ryan's conviction was based only on corruption that occurred while he was secretary of state and governor starting in the 1990s, he should be entitled to at least the portion of his state pension that accrued in earlier phases of his 40-year political career.

That would entitle Ryan to about \$65,000 a year.

"Obviously, the loss of his pension is a great loss. He has precious few assets," Thompson said in a telephone interview from Chicago on Wednesday night. "He's had no income since the day after his conviction."

Thompson said the appeal would probably begin in circuit court in either Chicago or Springfield, but that the state Supreme Court might also be an option.

The board's decision was based on a policy that requires loss of pension for government employees who commit felonies in connection with their government employment. Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, a Democrat, had given the board a legal opinion that Ryan should lose his whole pension as a result of his conviction.

"The whole policy was to serve as a deterrent" against corruption by public officials, said state Rep. Kurt Granberg, D-Carlyle, chairman of the retirement

board. "Hopefully, it will be a deterrent."

Even if the board's decision stands up in court, Ryan will be entitled to recoup the money he had put into the system over the years, a total of about \$235,000.

Ryan, a former pharmacist from Kankakee, climbed through the ranks of Illinois government for decades, building a reputation as the consummate deal-cutting politician. He was Illinois House speaker, then lieutenant governor for eight years, then served two terms as secretary of state before becoming governor in 1999.

His single term as governor was shadowed by scandal, as federal investigators in Chicago uncovered widespread bribery, extortion and other corruption among his friends and underlings — an investigation that ultimately led them to Ryan himself.

He left office in 2003. A federal jury earlier this year convicted him of bribery, tax fraud, money laundering, obstruction of justice and other crimes committed while he was secretary of state and governor.

Ryan was supposed to begin his 78-month prison term Jan. 4, but the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Tuesday he could remain free on bond pending his appeal. The court's written ruling didn't comment on its reasoning, but specified that if it ultimately upholds his conviction, he will have to immediately start serving his sentence.

Ryan's appeal is based in part on allegations that some jurors in his trial had lied about legal problems they'd had, including one who'd had a run-in with the secretary of state's office while Ryan headed it.

If his conviction is overturned on appeal, his pension would have to be reinstated.

Thompson said Ryan was happy about Tuesday's appellate court decision to allow him to remain free pending his appeal. As for the retirement board's decision to yank his pension, Thompson said, "It wasn't a surprise."

Thompson's firm, Winston & Strawn of Chicago, has donated millions of dollars' worth of free legal representation to Ryan through his trial.

The federal case against Ryan alleged he used his official power to help friends fix state contracts; that he personally took bribes from contractors in the form of vacations and cash; and that he lied to federal investigators who were probing the allegations.

The allegations were initially sparked by bribery convictions against Ryan's underlings at the secretary of state's office, including one who sold a license to an unqualified trucker who later caused a highway accident that killed six children in one family.

Ryan was so besieged by scandal by the end of his term that he declined to run for re-election in 2002. Democrats took over almost every level of power in state government in the elections that followed, in large part by associating Republican candidates with Ryan.

The strategy remained potent in this year's elections, when Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich won re-election after a campaign aimed largely at tying Republican challenger Judy Baar Topinka to Ryan's former government, even though she was an independently elected official.