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Stop The Gravy Train

ONE QUESTION demands to be answered as the Blanton administration considers the authorization of an 11-per-cent cost-of-living raise to judges, legislators and other high-ranking state officials. What other public employes are getting that kind of a raise? To compound what would be an irresponsible raid on public funds, payments to the judges would be retroactive for this fiscal year. The other raises apparently would have to be retroactive, too.

The blame for this situation lies with the legislature, which two years ago passed a bill granting cost-of-living increases to all top officials. That was a reckless move. A moment of thought should have made the legislators aware that the state's economy could not be expected to support such spending every year.

Last year the legislature placed a 2½-per-cent ceiling on all raises because of a shortage of funds. But the judges refused to accept it and went without any increase. This year a 9-per-cent ceiling was enacted. Again the judges are holding out for the full amount they say they are entitled to. Some have indicated they will sue the state, if necessary, to get the 11 per cent. Their plight doesn't quite pull at the heartstrings. Circuit Court judges, for in-

stance, make \$32,775 a year. A modest raise wouldn't leave them destitute.

Gov. Ray Blanton's legal counsel, T. Edward Sisk, said the administration is trying to avoid a lawsuit. But why should it? If the matter needs to be settled in court, then the administration should let the judges proceed in that direction. Giving in to the threat of a suit doesn't represent responsible leadership.

The state attorney general has ruled that full cost-of-living raises, as provided for by the legislature, are an integral part of the salaries of the judges and other affected officials. He's said the raises must be given. But that's just an opinion, not the finding of a court. The state Constitution says the salaries of those officials can't be raised or lowered during their term of office. Are automatic, annual increases unconstitutional? The administration should find out before releasing scarce tax dollars.

FUNDS for the raises apparently would come from an anticipated \$10-million surplus. With all of the cutbacks that have had to be made in public services and the unmet needs in such areas as education, health care and corrections, that money could be put to much better use than on a gravy train.

At A Standstill On I-40

ABOUT THE MOST interesting thing about state Highway Commissioner Eddie Shaw's comments on completion of Interstate Highway 40 through Memphis was that he made them in Jackson, Tenn.

Maybe it was just to have something to say to the businessmen's group he was addressing on Thursday. But it makes us wonder if just possibly some people in other parts of Tennessee are asking why this issue of I-40 and Overton Park cannot be resolved.

Federal transportation officials will be looking over the state's proposal for a partially covered roadway through the park next month. It was the federal Department of Transportation, under the leadership of Secretary William T. Coleman Jr., which came up with the slurry-wall tunnel proposal for putting I-40 through Overton Park after years of stalemate.

Shaw's state highway people, and the administration of Gov. Ray Blanton in general, have been cold toward the tunnel

plan because of its enormous cost — estimates ranging from \$119 million to \$180 million. Even the state's 10 per cent share of the construction cost is enough to scare away those who are trying to find a way to complete the highway segment through Memphis. But equally alarming is the projected annual maintenance cost of about \$450,000, a figure that is intolerable.

While Shaw was telling his Jackson audience nothing new when he said, "You can disregard any action on Overton whatsoever" if the cut-and-cover tunnel is all federal officials will approve, he was underscoring the Blanton line. And it's a justifiable line, for that kind of money is out of reason.

MORE IMPORTANT at the moment is that Shaw and the state highway engineers come up with good, environmentally acceptable design and strong support for whatever they propose as the method for completing I-40 across Memphis.