

2 Blue Island brothers in line for 6 government pensions

BY ANDREW SCHROEDTER Better Government Association November 4, 2013 12:03AM

New Blue Island mayor gives jobs, deals to insiders

Since taking office in May, new Blue Island Mayor Domingo Vargas has given two newly created city jobs to campaign supporters and handed no-bid contracts to political allies.

Vargas, a former Blue Island alderman, appointed campaign contributor John Rita Jr. as director of public safety, a new post that pays \$90,000 a year to oversee the south suburb's police and fire departments. Rita and his brother, state Rep. Robert Rita (D-Blue Island), were unpaid campaign advisers to Vargas, who ran as a member of the new Blue Island Independent Party with the backing of the Rita brothers.

Other moves under Vargas include:

- ◆ Hiring Mesirow Financial to procure new health insurance coverage for municipal employees through Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Illinois. Mesirow employs Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan's son Andrew Madigan, who worked with Blue Island officials on the no-bid deal. Approved Aug. 29, it will cost the city \$2.3 million a year. Robert Rita, a political ally of the House speaker, says he vouched for Mesirow to city officials. The firm's commission was \$39,000, according to City Clerk Randy Heuser.

- ◆ Hiring Vargas campaign volunteer Don Marchbanks as director of the Blue Island Emergency Management Agency, which handles traffic and crowd control at public events. This previously was an unpaid position. Marchbanks was given a \$12,000-a-year salary.

- ◆ Awarded a no-bid contract to a Chicago law firm that employs state Rep. Chris Welch (D-Westchester) and Welch's wife, ShawnTe Raines, who was named Blue Island's city attorney after Vargas took office. Raines is to be paid \$185 an hour, billing the city as an independent contractor.

"I'm not here to win a popularity contest," says Vargas. "I'm here to bring change to this town."

It's no longer a surprise to hear about double-dippers — public servants who've managed to carve out two government paychecks or pensions for themselves.

But state Rep. Robert Rita (D-Blue Island) and his brother John Rita Jr. could one-up that, each one day receiving three separate taxpayer-funded pensions, a total of six between them.

"Yes, it's unusual," Robert Rita says. "But it's not like we're doing this because of the pensions. I'm from a family that's dedicated to public service."

The Ritas are Blue Island's own version of Chicago's Daleys. The brothers' late father, John Rita Sr., was mayor of the south suburb. Their mother, Rose Rita, also now dead, was an alderman and Calumet Township supervisor.

Their sister Nancy Rita, 49, is a Blue Island alderman and also an administrative assistant in the office of Cook County Chief Circuit Judge Timothy Evans — a \$62,695-a-year county job that will one day provide her with a pension.

As a legislator, Robert Rita, 44, made \$74,569 last year. He is also Calumet Township supervisor, making \$67,000 a year after a 23 percent pay raise he got in June.

Until February, he also had a job as an administrative analyst with the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways, making \$93,423 a year, though he didn't get paid when he took time off to handle legislative matters.

Rita is vested in Cook County's government pension plan and also in retirement plans covering the Illinois General Assembly and the state's township governments.

If Robert Rita starts collecting his legislative, township and county pensions at 60, his total take-home could top \$118,000 a year.

The biggest chunk of that would be the retirement pay he'll get for his work as a legislator, an estimated \$63,000 a year, followed by a \$28,000-a-year township pension paid through the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund, and a county pension of \$27,000. Those calculations are based on Rita serving at least another decade as a state representative and township supervisor. They don't take into account any future pay raises he might get.

His brother, now 61, is a retired Cook County sheriff's commander now working for the city of Blue Island. John Rita Jr. already gets a county pension of \$90,588 a year, based on the 32 years he was a sheriff's employee, records show.

He also is eligible for but hasn't yet begun collecting a second pension, this one from the State Employees' Retirement System, or SERS, based on the nearly 10 years he worked as an administrator for state-government youth centers in Chicago and Joliet, a job that paid \$85,644 a year. His starting SERS pension would be more than \$13,000 a year.

When John Rita Jr. left county government, he was appointed by new Blue Island Mayor Domingo Vargas to a \$90,000-a-year post as the city's director of public safety in July. That put him in line for a third government pension if he works for the city at least eight years.

The Rita brothers had campaigned for the mayor, who was elected in April. John Rita Jr. gave \$1,000 to a Vargas-linked campaign fund but says that wasn't in hopes of any payback.

"I know what it looks like," he says. "But that wasn't my intention. I didn't come here looking for a windfall."

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