

All things considered, a bad idea

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By Richard Miniter

ALEXANDRIA, VA. — If you opened the mailbox or turned on the tube this holiday season, you learned to expect your local PBS television station to ask for an extra contribution.

You might want to save your contribution for a more deserving charity.

The Public Broadcasting System, a taxpayer-supported television broadcaster that carries "'Sesame Street" and other educational programs, has hired a lobbyist to persuade Congress to lift a \$148,400 salary cap imposed on PBS executives.

Current law forbids PBS and most other federal entities from paying their top officers more than the members of the president's Cabinet.

Do PBS programming executives deserve a thicker pay envelope than the secretary of state's?

PBS has hired Joan Kutcher, a veteran attorney with the Washington law firm Covington & Burling, a lobbying powerhouse, to persuade once-budget-conscious lawmakers that the execs do indeed.

This should be a hard sell. The PBS salary cap is nearly \$15,000 per year higher than the pay for congressmen and senators, even after their own recent controversial salary hike.

But PBS has good reason to expect Congress to quietly lift the salary cap - because lawmakers are funding nearly every item on its wish list.

Congress recently agreed to give \$300 million for basic operating expenses to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which funds and oversees the nation's public radio and television stations.

This is the largest sum ever given by the federal government to public broadcasting since the network started in 1967.

This 20 percent increase over the previous year's funding reverses four years of continuous funding declines. Since Congress appropriates funds two years in advance of the fiscal year, this \$300 million payment is for fiscal year 2000.

Don't let the future date fool you, cautions a congressional staffer. This figure "'is all but set in stone."

In addition, public broadcasters are asking for \$771 million to cover the costs of switching over to digital broadcasting, as required by the Federal Communications Commission.

This is by far the largest equipment purchase PBS has asked Congress to fund, second only to PBS' 1991 purchase of a new satellite.

Lobbyist Ms. Kutcher makes a two-part argument for boosting executive pay: \$148,400 is not

enough to attract top management talent in broadcasting, and other government entities can pay more. Both parts of her case dissolve under close examination.

Is \$148,400 really too small a paycheck to lure the best programmers to PBS?

This seems plausible until you consider most PBS executives don't come from Hollywood but from the public broadcasting world, where \$148,400 still represents a lot of money.

Public Broadcasting stars like "NewsHour" host Jim Lehrer are not subject to the salary cap because they are paid by production companies, not PBS.

Many PBS executives come from its larger metropolitan stations. In fact, a majority of PBS programs originate with one of its five stations: WNET in New York, WETA in Washington, WTTW in Chicago, KCET in Los Angeles and KQED San Francisco.

The \$148,000 is enough to lure a programming executive from one of these stations. Indeed, given the higher cost of living in many of those cities, moving to Washington would make many of them better off, even without a pay raise.

If, on the other hand, the higher pay is intended to lure Hollywood executives to PBS' red brick towers in Alexandria, Va., then the differences between public television's uniquely educational programs and typical network fare will diminish, perhaps disappear.

When that happens, what is the rationale for taxpayer support of PBS?

Ms. Kutcher's second argument, made in the pages of The Washington Post, is that other taxpayer-supported, federal government-controlled quasi- corporations are not subject to a salary cap.

"Amtrak doesn't have this type of salary cap," says Ms. Kutcher, adding that Amtrak gets more tax dollars than PBS. This is true, but irrelevant. No one is suggesting that PBS needs more money to lure executives away from Amtrak.

At the heart of Ms. Kutcher's case is me-tooism. A handful of other semi- autonomous corporations funded by Congress can pay more, why can't we?

Those seeking more pay than the secretary of state should join the private sector.

Congressional revolutionaries pledged to "zero out" public broadcasting in 1995. Now they are supporting the largest budgets and biggest salaries in the history of public television. Don't call it progress.