

Posted Online: Posted online: May 2, 2008 1:58 PM
Print publication date: 05/04/2008

Editorial: Ending pay to play

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The Dispatch and The Rock Island

Even as seedy revelations continue to ooze from the federal corruption trial of Antoin "Tony" Rezko, a top Gov. Rod Blagojevich fundraisers, a measure aimed at ending pay-to-play politics in Illinois inches forward.

The compromise legislation announced last week by a group of elected officials and good government advocates is a welcome development. Remember, it was more than a year ago that a similar, but stronger bill, House Bill 1, was approved in the House. Even though most Senators had signed on as sponsors, Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, has been sitting on it ever since. In fact, earlier this month, a Senate panel endorsed a competing bill HB824 which we, and many others feared, was aimed simply at derailing the House bill banning state contractors giving donations to politicians who control their contracts. Too often, Illinoisans have seen the two houses of the General Assembly pay lip service to ethics reforms by passing competing bills, only to have each die in the other chamber.

We hope that's not the case here, and the compromise offers fresh hope that something can at last be done to curb the corrupting influence of campaign contributions in Springfield. The word from Cynthia Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, last week was encouraging.

"State government contracts should be awarded on the basis of low prices and high quality performance, and contract decisions should not be based on big bucks contributions to a political campaign," she said. "By prohibiting campaign contributions by large contractors, Illinois can take a significant step toward reassuring the public that tax dollars are being spent fairly and the public's business is being put first."

The compromise represents a victory for Comptroller Dan Hynes, the ICPR and lawmakers who would not give up on the issue. Even its sponsor was surprised that the effort remained alive. "Candidly, I wasn't sure if this day would ever come," Rep. Fritchey said. "This is an historic opportunity for us to finally sever the ties between campaign contributions and doing business with the state."

The bill isn't as strong as House Bill 1, but it still bars businesses and their owners with \$50,000 in state contracts from making contributions to officeholders who award those contracts. Bidders would also have to disclose contributions they had made in the past to those officeholders. In short, the compromise measure is a huge improvement over business as usual. We urge lawmakers to join together and support it. Unfortunately, even if both houses pass the bill, there is no guarantee the governor will sign it. An e-mail to a St. Louis Post-Dispatch

reporter from spokesman Rebecca Rausch seemed to hint at a possible amendatory veto that could kill the hard-fought compromise.

She told reporter Kevin McDermott concerning House Bill 1 that the governor doesn't believe the legislation goes far enough. He's right of course, but you can't help but question his motives when you look at the huge piles of campaign cash he's raised from people doing business with the state. We worry that the governor is instead engaged in an old game that Ms. Canary described early last week as "loving it to death."

Considering the discontent of the electorate, wise politicians would be certain that real curbs on pay-to-play live on.

Even if the governor is unwise enough to kill this bill, we hope lawmakers are smart enough to resurrect it. Rep. Fritchey was correct when he said, "Illinois will have a more honest and open government when this bill becomes law."

We urge lawmakers, and Gov. Blagojevich to make it happen.