

# Ethics bill a step toward restoring trust in state government

by Illinois Rep. John Fritchey

Should anybody ever need a reminder of the importance of comprehensive ethics and campaign finance laws, they unfortunately need look no further than my home state of Illinois.

At a time when a sputtering economy, skyrocketing gas prices and home foreclosures



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dominate the headlines of most states, residents of Illinois find themselves confronted daily with news stories about corruption investigations, indictments and convictions of individuals tied to state government.

Making matters worse is the fact that this same news cycle has now lasted for almost a decade. Only the names have been changed and not to protect the innocent.

## History of corruption

With no limits on campaign contributions, lax reporting laws and little oversight of lobbyists, Illinois has long been referred to as the "Wild West" of campaign finance.

So perhaps it is no surprise that three of the last seven Illinois governors have gone to jail and that more than 70 lobbyists, state employees and government officials have also been convicted in recent years for offenses related to the abuse of state government.

While many may feel that the justice system may have worked as it was intended to, I would argue that good prosecution is no substitute for good government.

Proving that every tolerance level has its limits, Illinoisans have finally made it clear that they will no longer accept "politics as usual" as a given; they are rightfully demanding the changes that they have been promised as long as one can remember.

To that end, over three years ago, I introduced legislation that would be considered a given in most states, but was unheard of, and unwelcome, in Illinois.

The legislation, most recently known as HB 1 and HB 824, would end pay-to-play politics in Illinois and reform the current manner of "doing business" that has dominated headlines for far too long.

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I was joined at the announcement of the legislation by state Comptroller Dan Hynes, who initiated the idea, as well as by leading Democratic and Republican representatives and senators.

Just as Illinois past corruption crossed party lines and geographic boundaries, so too did the effort to bring it to an end.

In sum, the legislation prohibits any person or entity holding a state contract in excess of \$50,000 from contributing to the officeholder who awarded the contract. The bill further requires that, as part of the procurement process, bidders on state contracts disclose all campaign contributions to the officeholder awarding the contract for the prior two years.

But Illinois political culture being what it is, and despite picking up numerous co-sponsors in the House, we were unable to gain the necessary traction to move the bill forward in our first two years of attempts.

## Bill stalls in Senate

In January 2007, the bill finally passed the Illinois House, unanimously no less, only to remain in limbo in the Senate.

Then came what I refer to as a "perfect storm" for ethics reform.

A former governor was convicted and sentenced to 6½ years in prison for racketeering conspiracy, fraud and other offenses related to the exchange of payoffs for state business.

Concurrently, several other investigations, indictments and convictions captured headlines around the state.

Add these two factors to a backdrop of legislative stalemate and a record overtime session the previous year, and you get a public, once complacent, that had quickly vaulted past discontent and was now in outrage mode.

Editorial boards from around the state urged the release and passage of the bill by the Senate.

Good-government groups, led by the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, kept the call

## Submissions welcome

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for change as a consistent rallying cry. Legislators were hearing about the issue from their constituents on a regular basis.

Eventually, the Senate suddenly indicated a willingness to negotiate "compromise language" in order to move the legislation forward.

## Agreement at last

Following several weeks of intensive negotiations that covered everything from arduous semantic debates to an assurance by the Senate to override any potential veto by the governor, an agreement on language was reached between myself and the lead Senate sponsor, Sen. Don Harmon.

Three years of effort and countless obstacles along the way caused me to lead off the press conference announcing the agreement by commenting, "It must be

snowing in hell.

The good news is that on May 31, 2008, the last scheduled day of the legislative session, the Illinois General Assembly unanimously passed what the media described as "the strongest campaign fund-raising restrictions state lawmakers have ever approved."

It must be noted that as of the time of writing this article, it remains to be seen what action the governor will take with respect to the bill.

I have now served in the Illinois General Assembly for 12 years, and am proud to count passage of this measure among the achievements of my tenure.

Public confidence in government, once shaken, is very difficult to rebuild. But through the passage of this bill, we have taken a significant step in the right direction. ★

*Illinois Rep. John Fritchey, a Democrat from Chicago, was first elected in 1996. He hosts his own blog, Open House, which provides a forum for him, his constituents and others to share their views on Illinois politics. The Web site address is [www.johnfritchey.blogspot.com](http://www.johnfritchey.blogspot.com).*

## Summary of Illinois HB 824

After receiving unanimous approval in the Illinois General Assembly, HB 824 reached the governor's desk in June. Gov. Rod Blagojevich had until late August to decide whether to veto the bill, sign it or simply allow it to become law.

According to legislative proponents and the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, HB 824 would limit "pay-to-play" political opportunities in the state's contracting process. The ethics bill would prohibit large state contractors from making contributions to the political committee of the officeholder awarding the contract.