



Ethics bill near passage

Package aims to prevent 'pay to play' political deals

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After three years of trying, key members of the Illinois House and Senate said Wednesday they've reached agreement on a bill that begins to crack down on "pay to play" politics.

Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, and Sen. Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, said that in a matter of days, the General Assembly could vote on the package that will ban campaign contributions from contractors doing \$50,000 or more in state business.

"There's a good chance it may be snowing in hell right now, because a lot of people didn't expect this to happen," Fritchey said. "This is something that had to be done, it was something the people of Illinois deserved and something the people of Illinois demanded."

Skeptics thought the Democratically controlled House and Senate would pass different versions of an ethics bill, allowing each chamber to say it supports reform, but without anything becoming law. The House passed a similar ethics bill a year ago, but it was never called for a vote in the Senate. Two weeks ago, senators unveiled their own ethics plan that was similar, but not identical, to the House legislation.

The announcement Wednesday by Fritchey and Harmon that both House and Senate negotiators agree on the same bill is intended to send a message to Gov. Rod Blagojevich not to try rewriting it after it gets to his desk. Blagojevich has indicated he might use his amendatory-veto powers to make changes to an ethics bill if it isn't to his liking.

"I would hope that Gov. Blagojevich would open his eyes and ears and hear the message that is being sent to him by the General Assembly and the 12 million people we represent that we want this bill to be the law of the land," Fritchey said.

"The governor needs to sign this bill as is, as written, as passed," said Comptroller Dan Hynes, a proponent of the legislation who attended Wednesday's news conference at which the agreement was announced.

"This sends a signal to the people that we are done with playing games, that contracts should be awarded based on the best price and the best quality of service, not who you know and who you contribute to," said Cynthia Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

Sen. Christine Radogno, R-Lemont, attended the news conference to support the bill. But she also called it just the first step. She said contracting laws must be further tightened so that businesses cannot circumvent competitive-bidding laws and that lawmakers should look at restricting contributions from other groups that benefit from state contracts, such as labor unions.

“Everything that’s going on (today) is good; it just can’t end here,” Radogno said.

If House Bill 824 is passed, the restrictions won’t begin until 2009, after the current election cycle. Fritchey said the delay is necessary to give the State Board of Elections, which will administer disclosure provisions of the bill, time to implement it.

Key points of the bill

These provisions will be added to House Bill 824, likely next week:

- * Bans campaign contributions to statewide officeholders (such as the governor) from businesses that have contracts of \$50,000 or more. The ban applies to the official who awarded the contract. Companies, including their top executives and affiliates, also are prohibited from contributing to candidates running for that office. The \$50,000 figure was selected because it targets companies that can afford to make large contributions.

- * Businesses that have contracts of \$50,000 and over will have to register with the State Board of Elections, and those wanting to obtain a large state contract will have to register before bidding. The board will maintain a database that lists the businesses, their affiliates and top officers. The site will link to any campaign contributions made by those entities, as well as any other contracts held by them.

- * Requires businesses to notify any political committee to which they contribute if they hold a large contract.

- * A business that violates the law will have its contract canceled. If a business commits three violations in a three-year period, it will be banned from bidding on state contracts.

- * A political committee that accepts banned contributions will be required to turn the money over to the state.

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Key players in ethics legislation

Sen. Don Harmon, D-Oak Park

Harmon was a lead negotiator for Senate Democrats on the ethics bill. He pledged that if Gov. Rod Blagojevich makes any changes to it, he will work to have the Senate restore the bill to its original form.

Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago

Fritchey largely authored a similar ethics bill that passed the House last year but was never called for a vote in the Senate. Without specifically mentioning the federal corruption trial of Blagojevich fundraiser Antoin “Tony” Rezko, Fritchey said “recent events have made it crystal clear” that the state needs ethics reform. If Blagojevich modifies the bill, “it will be overridden in the House,” Fritchey said.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich

It is on Blagojevich’s desk any ethics bill passed by the House and Senate will end up. He could sign it into law as is, but many legislators fear he will use his amendatory veto to make changes. Blagojevich would argue that he is making the legislation better, but the

action also would jeopardize the chances the ethics bill would ever become law. Lawmakers could either vote to accept the changes made by the governor or vote to restore the bill to its original form.

– *Doug Finke*

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