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STATE OF CORRUPTION

Lobbyists not required to report state lobbying income

State Rep. John Fritchey has a proposed a bill that would change that policy

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Before Roland Burris moved to Washington as the state's junior U.S. senator, he made a comfortable living influencing public policy as a lobbyist at four levels of government.

Public records show his lobbying firm raked in about \$378,000 in 2007 and 2008 for representing companies before the city of Chicago, Cook County and the federal government in Washington.

How much he made lobbying the state of Illinois does not have to be reported, and he complied by not reporting a dime.

In a state where the taint of big money has infected the highest offices of Illinois government, there is no requirement for Burris or any of the nearly 1,900 registered lobbyists to report how much money they made seeking to manipulate state policy and legislation.

Illinois lawmakers last week sent Gov. Pat Quinn a measure that would require ethics training for lobbyists and tighten the requirements for disclosing how much they spend wining and dining public officials -- but it does not require any disclosure of what the lobbyists make from their clients. The Illinois Reform Commission launched by Quinn highlighted lobbying as an area that needs further study because of lax regulation, but did not call for new restrictions.

"One of the curious things about this issue is while everybody seems to be falling over themselves to try and enact every reform they can think of, this issue is remaining largely untouched," said state Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago). He sponsored a bill to require that lobbyists publicly report what they make to influence state government, but doesn't expect it to get any traction with just a week left before lawmakers' scheduled adjournment.

"It's still disconcerting to me that lobbyists at the state level can't be held to the same level of transparency as lobbyists at the city level. And, as is most often the case, more transparency is a good thing, and I'll keep working toward that as we move forward," Fritchey said.

Some of indicted ex- Gov. Rod Blagojevich's biggest fundraisers and closest advisers quickly became some of the state's most sought-after lobbyists after he took office, and several figured into the alleged wrongdoing that brought him down. One, former top aide John Wyma, helped federal investigators secretly record Blagojevich as he allegedly demanded campaign cash or personal favors in return for government favors.

Often referred to by insiders as the Third House of the legislature, lobbyists are a powerful force in state government because they interact frequently with the governor, lawmakers and other state officials at the very time public policy decisions are made.

By requiring lobbyists to report how much their clients pay them, the public would get some idea of how much special interest groups are spending to influence public policy.

Lobbyist earnings are standard disclosures at other levels of government and in about 25 states, said the National Conference for State Legislatures. For Illinois government, however, lobbyists don't have to report anything beyond who they lobby for and how much they spend on public officials.

David Morrison, deputy director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, estimated that \$80 million to \$100 million is paid to lobbyists contracted to sway Illinois government. He said he thinks the lobbyists' earnings should be public information.

"Their reason for being is to influence the decisions of officials," Morrison said.

Veteran lobbyist Randall Witter said lobbyists on average charge between \$10,000 and \$60,000 for a yearlong contract but deals can sometimes top \$100,000.

John J. Kelly, a lobbyist who works at four levels of government, said he would be happy to disclose what he collects for lobbying at the state level through his firm, All-Circo Inc., but cautioned that additional requirements could cause some confusion if the public is trying to get to the bottom line.

In 2008 Kelly's firm reported earning \$565,300 for lobbying officials at the city of Chicago and \$560,400 for lobbying officials at Cook County. For many of his clients, Kelly had a contract for which he lobbied at both levels of government and was paid once, but had to report the same earnings at each level, he said. Adding the two figures together would make his earnings look twice as big -- an issue that also could arise with state disclosures.

Bob Myers, spokesman for The Third House, a trade association, said it isn't fair to require lobbyists to disclose how much they earn because they aren't the only people who influence public policy. Further, he said, contracts between lobbyists and clients are private documents.

He's against disclosing exact amounts of contract agreements but said he is open to discussing the idea of disclosing payments based on a threshold similar to the federal level, where payments are rounded to the nearest \$10,000.

While lobbyists might be willing to deal with the added sunshine, the real opposition might lie in the clients dishing out the money.

Todd Maisch, vice president of governmental affairs for the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, said Illinoisans need to understand that businesses have a desire to keep some costs private, especially away from competitors.

"The notion that, simply because you're there working with the government, that disclosure of your private finances is mandatory is something that I think ought to be discussed thoroughly -- at least," Maisch said.

After three terms as comptroller and one as attorney general, Burriss had the knowledge and connections to land steady business lobbying state government. Oddly enough, it was a federal disclosure Burriss filed after Blagojevich appointed him to the U.S. Senate that identified some of Burriss' earnings for lobbying state government.

The records showed Burriss or his firm, Burriss & Lebed, collected at least \$5,000 last year from each of three clients lobbying state government. The same records show he or his firm made at least \$5,000 last year from each of six other clients lobbying the city, county and federal governments.

Fred Lebed, who worked in the lobbying firm with Burriss until he became a senator, welcomed the Fritchey bill to list earnings.

"Throughout my nearly 25-year career in the public sector and during these past 10 years as a consultant and lobbyist, I have always felt that there can never be too much transparency in the disclosure of information from lobbyists," Lebed said. "The public deserve and expect nothing less."

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