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Our Opinion: Good ideas, wrong tactics on ethics bill

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WE CAN'T DENY that Gov. Rod Blagojevich has some good ideas when it comes to curtailing "pay-to-play" politics in Illinois.

He wants a ban on campaign donations by holders of big government contracts to include not just statewide officeholders, but lawmakers, candidates for office and political parties as well. He wants to end the current system by which lawmakers can receive pay raises without having to vote on them. He wants to stop "double dipping" by prohibiting lawmakers from holding other government jobs. And he wants more disclosure of lobbying activities by lawmakers and their spouses.

GREAT IDEAS, every one. But in tacking them all onto an ethics bill that was years in the making — and that the General Assembly passed without a single no vote — Blagojevich has taken the wrong approach to making them law. He wants the General Assembly to debate and approve his many changes during the veto session in November.

That hasty approach, we believe, is neither feasible nor responsible, and we think the General Assembly should override Blagojevich's amendatory veto in November.

There is a reason why the bill in question — House Bill 824 — traces its roots back to 2005, when Comptroller Dan Hynes, then-Sen. Miguel del Valle, D-Chicago, and Reps. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, and Bill Black, R-Danville, appeared together to promote an early version of an anti-pay-to-play bill. A bill of this import requires extensive debate and vetting to ensure it will withstand possible challenges in court. House Bill 824 itself was introduced way back in February 2007.

That's why we think it is important that the General Assembly override Blagojevich's amendments and keep the bill in its original form. There simply are too many questions in Blagojevich's additions to address sufficiently in a six-day legislative session.

But we don't want Blagojevich's proposals to die, either.

IN AN INTERVIEW with The State Journal-Register's editorial board, Deputy Gov. Bob Greenlee said this week that Blagojevich had good reason for changing the bill via amendatory veto rather than by pushing legislation.

"The reality is that these are changes that would never get passed otherwise. They would never get called (for a vote)," Greenlee said. "Giving them the opportunity to be called and heard is something important to us."

That's probably true. Despite Wednesday's hug-fest at the Democratic National Convention, the relationship between Blagojevich and House Speaker Michael Madigan has generally been poisoned. Until we see more evidence of a real thaw between the governor and the speaker, we don't see much hope for any legislation Blagojevich pushes.

That's where the challenge comes.

FRITCHEY SAID he'll push for an override of Blagojevich's veto this fall. Yet he also said he'll push the governor's proposed amendments as individual bills. We'll take Fritchey up on that proposal.

The fact that the additional restraints on campaign donors originated with Blagojevich should not impede their chances of becoming law. However, we prefer a system in which laws are forged by rigorous debate, not with broad strokes of the governor's amendatory veto pen.

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