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Senate says no to gov's ethics package

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SPRINGFIELD — In a 55-0 defeat for Gov. Blagojevich, the Senate Monday rejected his rewrite of an ethics package and reinstated an earlier ban on political contributions from big state contractors who have been the governor's financial lifeblood.

"This shows he has zero credibility on the issue," said Comptroller Dan Hynes, who was one of the guiding forces behind the new restrictions.

The override vote, proponents of the original bill said, should spark a crackdown on state contracts being traded for campaign contributions. Under the new law, sponsored by Sen. Don Harmon (D-Oak Park) and Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago), contractors with \$50,000 or more in state deals will be barred from donating to the officeholder who is in charge of their contracts.

In his re-write attempt, the governor scrapped that language and inserted provisions barring legislators from drawing outside, non-elected government salaries; changing how they award themselves pay raises; and requiring disclosure from those lawmakers who personally lobby city or county governments.

Blagojevich, for whom five-figure contractor donations have been a political lifeline, claimed that the ethics bill as passed Monday didn't go far enough to clean up state government. He's also argued the bill as approved is redundant with a gubernatorial executive order set to take effect on Jan. 1, 2009, that would ban businesses with \$50,000-plus state deals from making contributions to all state office holders, legislators, candidates for state office and political parties.

Critics have said the executive order is legally unenforceable.

"I think the governor, as the messenger, is part of the problem here," said Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. "He's the one with the cloud over his head. So it's very difficult to take it at face value when he comes in with a magical ethical fix."

Monday's Senate vote occurred after Democrat Barack Obama personally sided against Blagojevich's rewrite and for the contractor restrictions. Obama called Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago) to allow an immediate vote after prodding from Canary, Republicans and the Chicago Sun-Times editorial board.

"The Illinois Senate took an important step forward today by breaking the gridlock and unanimously passing a tougher ethics law that will reduce the influence of money over our state's political process and further the bipartisan reforms I worked with my colleagues in the General Assembly to pass ten years ago," Obama said in a statement.

Jones had wanted to hold off on the override until vote after the Nov. 4 election. But Attorney General Lisa Madigan and others said that could open the contractor restrictions to legal challenges because the measure hadn't been acted on soon enough following the House's 110-3 override vote earlier this month.

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