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Showdown coming on Ill. reforms

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. • Illinois legislators are going to reach agreement on a long-stalled plan to crack down on "pay-to-play" politics by next week, or not at all, backers of the proposal predicted today.

"We need to see some kind of an announcement of an agreement within the next week," said Cynthia Canary of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, which has spent more than a year pushing a proposal to ban campaign donations from state contractors to the elected officials who control their contracts.

"Should this fall apart . . . we will get out there publicly" and make the case that legislators have acted in bad faith on the issue, Canary said.

Illinois state contractors routinely give big-money political contributions to the elected officials who give them tax-funded business, a system that many say smacks of legalized bribery. Illinois Senate and House members have been negotiating legislation to ban those contributions.

The effort has been hampered in the past year by an on-going political war between the House and Senate, whose leaders are hesitant to work together on anything these days. But it may be helped by controversy surrounding Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who has taken millions of dollars from state contractors and whose administration is ensnared in a federal corruption probe.

"If we can't pass a ban on 'pay-to-play' in this environment, something is wrong," said state Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, who got the proposed ban passed in the House a year ago, only to see it bottled up in the Senate.

Fritchey has led the negotiations for the House, and he said Wednesday he is "cautiously optimistic" that the logjam over the issue is about to break. But he and other proponents haven't ruled out the possibility that Senate leaders are merely stringing them along to stall the issue.

"If there's not an agreement by the beginning of next week, I think that will raise some red flags," Fritchey said.

The Senate's inaction on Fritchey's ethics bill -- HB 1 -- has been a point of contention for reformers for months. A Senate committee last week finally took up the issue, but instead of passing the House bill that was already pending, the committee advanced its own, similar legislation, essentially restarting the process from the beginning.

To some critics, it smacked of a familiar old maneuver in Springfield in which both chambers of the Legislature pass different forms of ethics legislation, but neither approves the other's bill, thus allowing lawmakers to claim they voted to change the system without actually doing it.

Senate sponsors insist that isn't what they're doing. "That's not what's going on here," said state Sen. Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, chief Senate sponsor of the ethics package.

Harmon predicted an imminent breakthrough in the negotiations, which, he said, could mean a bill that passes both the Senate and House in the coming week.

"I think we are in substantive agreement right now," Harmon said.

The issue of political contributions from state contractors has long been a controversial one in Illinois, which has no campaign donation limits. Former Gov. George Ryan is currently serving a federal prison term for crimes that included steering state contracts to major campaign contributors.

Testimony in the current federal trial of Blagojevich fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko has included allegations of the same thing going on in the Blagojevich administration. A recent review of about 50 of the top service contractors in the state found that fully half of them are major Blagojevich donors.

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