

## Time to sign state ethics bill into law

Given the explosive evidence presented during the Antoin "Tony" Rezko corruption trial the last few months, there likely are few political insiders who are surprised the jury found Rezko guilty on most counts.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich's former top fundraiser was convicted Wednesday by a federal jury in Chicago on 16 of 24 charges, including mail fraud, wire fraud and robbery.

Technical terms, sure, but here's the gist: Rezko, the prosecution contended, extorted bribes and kickbacks from those who did business with the state.

And now the feds likely will ramp up the investigation into the pay-to-play culture they contend was embraced by Team Blagojevich.

We have one immediate suggestion for our governor: When you walk into the meeting that you asked for today with legislative leaders, bring the new ethics bill with you and sign it on the spot.

Blagojevich should tell the group he'll concede any opportunity to make the bill better, as he claimed he wanted to do, and sign it as a goodwill gesture and indication of a willingness to work together.

Beyond that, he could make it clear to everyone in the state that his actions, not just words, represent a change in the right direction.

As you may recall, this was the governor who promised to "rock the system" with his own, strict ethics improvements legislation. He's done little to further that so-called goal.

The bill that flew through the House last spring was suffocated by Blagojevich's ally in the Senate, President Emil Jones, who also said at the time he wanted to make the bill "stronger."

The nearly identical bill this year flew through the House, and then the Senate. Blagojevich now should drop any talk about making it better and just sign it.

Here's why: This governor has been the most prolific fundraiser of any statewide candidate in Illinois history, to the tune of about \$58 million in about six years.

According to one Chicago area newspaper investigation, some 73 percent of the money recently pumped into the governor's campaign came from donors who do business with the state, face state regulation or lobby the state.

The linchpin of the new ethics bill takes a big swipe at that problematic practice. It would ban any company seeking state business in excess of \$50,000 from donating to the state officeholder responsible for awarding the contract.

We haven't heard of a change of plans yet because of the Rezko verdict, but we hope a planned meeting today of four of the five state government leaders isn't postponed.

It was a meeting Blagojevich called in an attempt to balance a 2008-09 spending plan our governor says is \$2.1 billion in the red.

Signing the ethics bill first could get that meeting off to a productive start.