



A leader, not a laggard on ethics reform Assembly legislation would restore public trust in government By Albio Sires

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Deserved or undeserved, New Jersey has endured for decades a reputation as a state where unethical conduct flourishes. Transgressions have occurred at all levels of government and have involved the well-publicized arrests of officials in both major political parties. The problem has gone on for so long and with such frequency that the state's image has taken a beating. The Almanac of American Politics, in fact, one went so far as to label New Jersey "the nation's most corrupt state."

According to a national survey released in January by the Washington-based Corporate Crime Reporter newsletter, New Jersey actually ranks 16th in the country in terms of impropriety by officials.

Whether ranked first or 16th for public corruption, it's clear that the time has come for New Jersey to make changes so the public's confidence in the governmental process can be restored.

Over the past 30 years, we have witnessed mounting public cynicism about elected officials selling out to special interests or being bought off by campaign contributors. Fewer people are taking part in the electoral process. Spending in elections has become a lucrative growth industry. Government service has become a turnoff.

Recognizing this long-festering trend of eroding public trust, Assembly Majority Leader Joseph Roberts Jr. and I recently unveiled a sweeping 25-point plan that would make New Jersey a leader instead of a laggard on ethics reform.

The initiative would curtail the potentially corrupting pay-to-play practice of awarding state contracts to businesses. It would require all state contracts to be bid, and it would create a Clean Elections pilot program for legislative races.

It would address long-ignored shortcomings in public contracting, campaign financing, legislative disclosure and ethical conduct by legislators. More important, it would set an example of ethical behavior that would put pressure on counties, municipalities and school districts to adopt their own reforms.

The plan would establish an impressive list of precedents for New Jersey:

Impose the toughest pay-to-play ban in the nation.

Make New Jersey the first state to ban no-bid contracts.

Enable New Jersey to become the first state to institute McCain-Feingold restrictions on issue ads in elections for state office

Establish Clean Elections reform for legislative races. New Jersey would be the first state to legislatively authorize such publicly financed legislative campaigns.

Place New Jersey among 23 other states in curbing revolving-door transitions between lobbying and legislating.

Put New Jersey in the top tier of states that require accountability by legislators through financial disclosure rules.

The heart of the plan is a proposal to restrict pay-to-play campaign contributions by government vendors and service providers. The vast majority of states - 47 of them - lack any sort of impediments to pay-to-play campaign contributions. Our proposal would put New Jersey with Ohio, West Virginia, and South Carolina - the three states that have curbs on pay-to-play.

Under the initiative, any business entering into a contract worth more than \$17,500 with the state or any state authority would be prohibited from contributing to those with ultimate responsibility over the contract (usually the governor) in addition to any state party committees. The restriction would apply to all contributions made within a year prior to negotiations for a state contract.

The measure would give municipalities and counties specific statutory authority to adopt their own pay-to-play ordinances. Counties and towns that embrace pay-to-play restrictions would have increased

eligibility for discretionary aid provided through the state Department of Community Affairs.

Other elements in the package would bar legislators, the governor and state Cabinet officers from becoming lobbyists for one year after leaving office, increase conflict-of-interest penalties for state public officials and give New Jersey one of the toughest legislative financial disclosure forms in the country.

The plan has won praise from a wide coalition of public interest groups, including AARP, the Sierra club, the New Jersey Public Interest Research Group, New Jersey Citizen Action, the state's largest consumer watchdog organization, and the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

To expedite passage, the Assembly State Government Committee is taking the extraordinary step of holding hearings on the plan during the Legislature's traditional spring budget break. Our goal is to pass this package by the end of June so the governor can sign it. New Jersey residents deserve such speedy action. There simply can't be any more basic a priority for the Legislature.

The public wants the political theater and posturing on ethics reform to end. This proposal will do just that, reforming the state system and setting an example to prevent the special interests from impeding the voice of the people.

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