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Full-Time Legislature is Bad for Connecticut



By Mike Alberts

Several outspoken Democratic legislators are pushing to make the Connecticut legislature a full-time, year-round job. Looking across the nation at the experience of the U.S. Congress and the states of New York, California, Pennsylvania and Michigan shows this is a terrible idea.

Connecticut has a long history of sending citizen-legislators to Hartford to write state laws. Replacing them with full-time career politicians would be disastrous and only compound Connecticut's problems.

Studies have shown that full-time legislatures are the most bitterly partisan, gridlocked, expensive and inefficient of any in America.

When elected officials have all year to do their business, matters usually slide to the end of the year. When politicians have \$100,000 jobs at stake, instead of \$32,000 Connecticut salaries, their political battles escalate and they become all the more partisan. When legislators meet 12 months of their year, they almost uniformly spend more on staff, travel, lunches, conferences and other accoutrements of legislative life.

Most of all, from the viewpoint of the average citizens, full time legislators have more time to figure out ways to create new programs, inflate government budgets and pass laws imposing their ideas on the people they govern.

Take Washington, D.C. In recent years, Congress has become synonymous with bitter partisan battles. Congressional leaders seem more intent on gaining political advantage over the opposing party in the next election than on passing legislation that helps America move forward.

At the state level, look at Albany where the legislature is consistently ranked the most dysfunctional in the nation. The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School reports that individual New York legislators are shut out of decision making, there is minimal debate on bills and the public has little access to information.

The New York legislature--long known for delayed budgets--recently adopted a \$120.9 billion budget almost on time, but it was negotiated in secret, and few legislators had read it.

Until recently, New York lawmakers allowed empty-seat voting, when they did not even need to be present in Albany to be recorded as voting on a bill.

Then there's California, which has been full time since 1966. Voter initiative there has imposed 12-year term limits to curb some legislative excesses.

Pennsylvania and Michigan, the other two full-time legislatures, also are known for political partisanship.

The Connecticut legislature works reasonably well. Most legislation, with a few notable exceptions, is adopted with bipartisan support. Legislators of both parties generally work together on drafting legislation, hammering out compromises and crafting fair and equitable new state laws.

Connecticut's part time legislature meets five months this year and three months next year. Then, lawmakers go back and resume their work in their home towns and cities.

Members of the Connecticut House and Senate have the benefit of everyday experience as teachers, nurses, lawyers, business owners, real estate agents, homemakers, engineers, builders, bankers, and a police officer.

Connecticut lawmakers remain close to the communities where they live and work, and they understand the challenges and concerns of their constituents. This is the way it should be.

For the first time in 20 years, Connecticut Democrats are considering a full-time legislature--primarily over conflict of interest issues between legislation and legislator's outside employment.

An expert with the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver said that is no reason to go to full time. "Conflicts of interest are inherent to the jobs in the public sector. That's not right or wrong. It's how people deal with these conflicts that are the ethical issue," Peggy Kerns, director of the NCSL Ethics Center was quoted recently. "There may be valid reasons for going full time, but I don't think ethics is one."

Full time legislators still would face conflicts over past jobs or spouse's jobs, and no full-time state legislature in the United States totally bans outside income.

Let's fully disclose outside employment, not ban it. A full-time legislature is a bad idea for Connecticut.

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