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Formula for Good Government



By Livvy R. Floren

Ethics reform has been a topic of grave concern ever since our State faced scandal after scandal five years ago.

As a member of the General Assembly's Government Administration and Elections committee, charged with proposing and crafting ethics legislation, the subject is again on my agenda for the 2008 session.

Strengthening the public's trust in state government is of utmost importance. We have made remarkable progress and many improvements to our state's ethics code since Governor Rell took office, and we must stay vigilant in our efforts to improve transparency and give Connecticut families the government they deserve. The Ethics Commission has been completely redesigned- it is now truly independent and autonomous and has members appointed by the executive and legislative branches of government as well as "good government" organizations like the League of Women Voters and Common Cause. The revamped Ethics Commission has a process in place that works with defined checks and balances and an appeals component.

Some new ethics proposals are supported by both parties and will be discussed in the upcoming session:

One initiative would require elected officials to receive training and a handbook describing ethical awareness and conduct. This proposal will require all legislators and municipal elected officials to review written materials and receive mandatory training in updated ethics laws including (but not limited to) the receipt of gifts and favors, conflicts of interest, disclosure and recusal, interaction with lobbyists and special interests, ethical values and judgment in public service. The required training would focus on ethics laws monitored and enforced by the State Ethics Commission. In addition, it would focus on ethical conduct, principles, and expectations that are not addressed by law, but that help define the highest quality public service.

Another common sense proposal would examine extending restrictions to state officials who lobby legislators. Commissioners, Deputy Commissioners, State Agency Heads and Legislative Liaisons serve vital governmental functions that are different from private

contract lobbyists. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of laws governing lobbyists that do not, but should, apply to such state officials. The proposal will bring laws governing state officials who lobby legislators more in line with those governing private lobbyists. For example, lobbyists are prohibited from contributing to legislative candidates and from giving gifts to legislators; State Officials who lobby legislators are not.

Enacting a criminal penalty for elected officials who fail to report if they are offered a bribe seems logical; in fact, most legislators were under the impression that this was already the law. Under a new ethics reform, a change would be made to the state criminal code, making it against the law not to report an attempted bribe. Other states, including Illinois and Alaska, have such prohibitions.

No one political party has a monopoly on ethics. The state must decide how much should be spent for "good and honest" government. Nothing is fool-proof; there will always be corrupt officials, and we must balance that with making ethics regulations too cumbersome, thus discouraging potential candidates from wanting to serve. As Plato said, "Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws."

Our goal with any new ethics rules and regulations is to maintain the public trust.