

A Bribery Arrest with a Big Backstory

Written by Rich Miller
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Appointed state Representative Derrick Smith (D-Chicago) hasn't been in the House very long, but few would've ever picked him as a future legislative star. He stumbles badly during debates, isn't well informed on the issues, and has obviously had a lot of trouble getting his arms around his new job.

In other words, he probably won't be missed.

Smith was arrested last week on federal bribery charges. The feds say a campaign worker told them that Smith was anxious about fundraising problems and was willing to trade favors for checks. After being told a day-care-center owner was willing to pony up big bucks in exchange for an official letter requesting a \$50,000 state grant, Smith allegedly pounced on the opportunity.

Smith's fundraising problems were abating, however. Just before his arrest last week, the legislator's campaign had reported raising about \$57,000 from several established state political action committees over the previous few days.

No longer in dire need of campaign money, Smith apparently decided to get some cash for himself. He allegedly worked it out with his campaign worker that he wanted \$7,000 in cash from what turned out to be a fictitious day-care-center owner. Smith rejected a cashier's check because he didn't want a paper trail, but then he offered to kick back part of the bribe via check

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to the campaign worker.

Now, first of all, what person with even half a brain believes that a day-care-center owner has \$7,000 in cash lying around? And what kind of idiot would also believe that the aforementioned day-care-center owner would be willing to give that money to an appointed, back-bench freshman in exchange for a state-grant recommendation letter?

I mean, really: A grant letter from Smith is supposed to be some sort of slam dunk? You'd have to be truly stupid to believe this was a "legit" offer.

And you're gonna write the campaign worker a kickback check as part of your grand scheme? Really? Hello? Is anybody at home in that cranium?

Representative Genius came to the General Assembly courtesy of Secretary of State Jesse White (who is also the 27th Ward Democratic Committeeman), despite the fact that Smith had been fired from his City of Chicago job a few years ago. The *Sun-Times* discovered that Smith had "used city equipment and personnel to do private landscaping work and improperly used state-financed Earnfare workers to lighten the load of city employees."

It ain't easy to get fired from a city job, but Smith somehow managed to anyway, and White dutifully hired him at the Secretary of State's office. And then, despite his questionable past, White installed Smith in the House when then-Representative Annazette Collins was appointed to the Senate after Rickey Hendon retired.

Secretary White has been trying to obtain a foothold in that particular legislative district for years, to no avail. He fought hard with Hendon.

White never really got along with Collins when she was in the House, either. When White helped appoint Collins to the Senate, he told the media that Collins had probably just promoted herself out of a job. White also controlled neither former state Representative Art Turner nor Turner's son, Art Turner Jr. So Smith's appointment finally gave him that long-sought foothold, and once White took care of that, he picked a candidate to challenge Senator Collins in the

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Democratic primary: Patricia Van Pelt-Watkins, who ran for mayor last year.

Smith's political sponsor is Alderman Walter Burnett, Secretary White's hand-picked city-council member. Smith and Burnett grew up together in Cabrini Green, the housing project where White has recruited members of his world-renowned Jesse White Tumblers team.

White issued a statement last week saying he was "disappointed" in Smith. But White said infinitely more than fellow Democrat House Speaker Michael Madigan, who went completely mum.

There was, of course, a tricky political dimension to this arrest. Smith's Democratic primary opponent, Tom Swiss, has been a Republican for years. Swiss is a former director of the Cook County Republican Party and is a white man running in a majority-black district. If Madigan called on Smith to resign, it would essentially have meant letting a Republican into his caucus. Some things transcend mere bribery arrests.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.