

Senate passes Lt. Governor's ethics reform bill

Written by Kara Beach
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Simon calls on House to pass revised Statement of Economic Interests

SPRINGFIELD – May 9, 2013. Lt. Governor Sheila Simon applauded the Senate today for its 52-1 passage of Senate Bill 1361, legislation that will reform the state's Statement of Economic Interests form. The bill now moves to the House.

"The people of Illinois deserve to know if elected officials and high-ranking government employees are working in the public's interest or in their own self interest," said Simon, who served on the Illinois Reform Commission. "Increased transparency builds trust and I appreciate Sen. Dan Kotowski's (D-Park Ridge) hard work in moving this reform measure through the Senate."

The bill proposes a new disclosure form, known as a Statement of Economic Interests, which would require filers to list outside sources of income, lobbyist relationships and loans made or accepted on terms not available to the general public, for the first time. It also revises questions that allowed filers to answer "not applicable" to almost every item on the current version of the form introduced 40 years ago.

The new form, completed by tens of thousands of public servants each year, will be easier for filers to complete, thanks to the plain-language questions, definitions of terms, and clear

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connections to information found on tax returns and investment statements. Simon collaborated on the bill with government watchdog groups, and it has received bipartisan support.

Cook County Clerk David Orr, whose office created an online Statement of Economic Interests database to improve transparency, worked with Lt. Governor Simon to overhaul the inadequate disclosure forms and applauds Simon for her leadership. Analysis of the 22,000 local government respondents that filed with his office in 2012 showed that 87 percent answered "not applicable" or "N/A" to every question on the disclosure form.

"I hope the new form will provide better and more information than before," Orr said. "I'm eager to put this data online next year to shed more light on public officials' conflicts of interest."

The Illinois Constitution and Illinois Governmental Ethics Act require elected officials, high-ranking government employees, and political candidates to complete a Statement of Economic Interests each May. State government workers file with the Secretary of State, while workers for local units of government file with their county clerk.

The forms are supposed to expose existing or potential conflicts of interest, but the documents use such vague and cumbersome language that the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform has called them "woefully inadequate" and "a waste of paper."

"I look forward to working with members of the House to help make Illinois more accountable and transparent," said Simon.

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