

Lt. Gov. Simon, Sen. Kotowski announce ethics reform

Written by Kara Beach

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New disclosure forms to close loopholes, expose conflicts of interest

SPRINGFIELD – November 29, 2012. Lt. Governor Sheila Simon joined State Sen. Dan Kotowski (D-Park Ridge) today to introduce ethics reform legislation that will overhaul the much-maligned financial disclosure forms filed by tens of thousands of public servants each year.

The bill proposes a new disclosure form – known as a Statement of Economic Interests – that 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 closes loopholes that allowed filers to answer “not applicable” to almost all of the questions on the current version of the form introduced 40 years ago.

Simon said the goal of the new form is to help Illinois residents determine if elected officials, high-ranking employees and candidates hold any conflicts of interest. The new form will also be easier for filers to complete thanks to the plain-language questions, definitions of terms and obvious connections to information found on tax returns and investment statements.

“At over 40-years-old, it’s time our financial disclosure forms get a facelift,” Simon said. “This legislation is about making our Statement of Economic Interests more understandable for the people who fill them out, and making them more transparent for those who want to get information from them.”

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State Sen. Dan Kotowski will introduce the bill in the Senate today after working with Lt. Governor Simon's office, the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform and the Better Government Association to redesign the form over the past year.

Residents want more transparency and accountability in Springfield, Kotowski and Simon said, citing a recent Southern Illinois University poll in which 65 percent of respondents said they were "not very" or "not at all satisfied" with the information available on elected officials' finances.

"With this important change, taxpayers can easily search information regarding potential conflicts of interest, and hold public officials and candidates accountable," Kotowski said. "This reform adds needed transparency in my effort to end politics as usual in Springfield."

Cook County Clerk David Orr, whose office created an online Statement of Economic Interests database to improve transparency, applauded Lt. Governor Simon for spearheading the effort to overhaul the inadequate disclosure forms. 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.

"For 40 years, these forms have revealed too little about elected officials' and public employees' financial profiles," Orr said. "I am so pleased to find a champion in Sheila Simon, whose commitment to expanding disclosure will help draw back the curtain on hidden 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."

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“Delegates writing the 1970 Constitution mandated the Statement of Economic Interest because the public has a right to know about public officials' conflicts of interest. It's high time the form caught up to modern economic practices,” said David Morrison, Deputy Director of the ICPR.

Simon and Kotowski said they will work together to pass the legislation by January.