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Our Opinion: Ethics bill needs modification

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The \$500 million in member-initiated projects within the state's \$31 billion capital bill provides yet another argument for applying better campaign finance limits to legislators.

Legislators' argument against stricter campaign finance limits (the current reform bill calls for \$5,000 contribution limits per donor per year, allowing incumbents to outgun and outrun their opponents) basically amounts to, "We're not the ones getting sent to jail by federal prosecutors, so we don't have to reform anything. We don't have the ability to do pay to play because we don't approve contracts."

The capital bill seems like one big exception to the latter statement. It's littered with no-bid grants to private organizations, but the bill doesn't say who requested what.

Without that information, it's incredibly time consuming at best and impossible at worst to cross-check a legislator's campaign contributions to see if the folks to whom they have doled out grants and projects anted up for their campaign.

That's why we hope Gov. Pat Quinn and the reform groups can persuade legislators to modify the ethics legislation passed by the General Assembly or pass a trailer bill — a separate bill that cleans up weaknesses in the existing bill — before Quinn signs it. Or Quinn simply could use the amendatory veto power he has under the state constitution to make the changes he should have insisted upon in the first place.

Areas that need to be worked on include:

*Making campaign contribution limits apply on a per-election cycle basis instead of an annual basis.

*Closing a loophole that allows legislative leaders to spend unlimited amounts of cash on their members' races via in-kind contributions. Whatever the limit, make it actually mean something.

*Change a provision that appears to ban special interest groups' political action committees from making any independent expenditures on behalf of or against candidates.

We're no fan of many of these groups, but such a law could be an unconstitutional limitation on freedom of speech and expose the state to litigation.

*The bill should require disclosure of bundlers — the fundraisers who have become famous in federal campaign finance scandals. They scoop up a bunch of individual donations for candidates in the hope of getting favors later.

Voters should know who they are.

Charlie Wheeler, a respected longtime statehouse reporter and director of the public affairs reporting program at the University of Illinois Springfield, argued recently in Illinois Issues magazine that the legislature did its job extinguishing the ethical fires disgraced Gov. Rod Blagojevich left within the executive branch.

Wheeler is right. The General Assembly has not been given enough credit for the yeoman's work it did sifting through and analyzing Blagojevich's transgressions and addressing them.

But the potential for corruption in the legislative branch still is great with the free flow of money allowed under the bill waiting for the governor's signature. Legislators need to act to ensure their branch of government remains scandal free.

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