

## Free loans for Jones

### HELPING HIMSELF | Senate President Emil Jones has taken tens of thousands of dollars from his campaign kitty

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Before championing a big legislative pay increase, Illinois Senate President Emil Jones provided himself with tens of thousands of dollars in interest-free loans from his campaign fund.

Under Illinois' relatively loose campaign-finance laws, there's nothing illegal about politicians dipping into their campaign funds that way. But it's highly unusual.

Since 1989, the South Side Democrat has taken out \$120,528 in personal loans from his political fund and repaid \$96,900 of that amount -- leaving nearly \$25,000 unaccounted for.

Just last year, Jones withdrew \$5,800 from his fund in 20 separate loans of \$200 or \$300 each between July and December.

In October alone, he had eight disbursements of \$300 apiece over a 23-day period.

Last week, Jones sparked criticism when he proclaimed, "I need a pay raise." That was in support of a pending 12 percent legislative pay raise set to take effect unless legislators took steps to block it. Jones stands to see his salary rise from \$91,824 to \$102,547.

A government watchdog group questioned whether Jones is using his campaign for personal expenses rather than political ones, under a loophole in a 1998 law that was supposed to ban the personal use of campaign funds.

"It absolutely looks like a slush fund," says Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. "He is living under a whole set of rules that no one else in the public is."

Jones' camp declined repeated requests from the Chicago Sun-Times for comment on how he has spent the money from his interest-free loans. A top aide would say only that some of the money was spent on gasoline. Campaign records don't appear to show what the loans were for. Nor is there anything in the public record stating the terms of the loans.

As chairman of his political fund, Jones decides the loan terms -- and whether the loans ever need to be repaid.

"It's the kind of open-ended float you would not get if you went to a commercial bank and asked for a loan," says Kent Redfield, a University of Illinois at Springfield political scientist who studied Jones' records for Canary's group. "It's 'other people's money.' [Campaign contributors] don't give you money to help you out with your lifestyle. They give you money to help you out with your campaign. If you rely on your fund to augment your lifestyle, that's a conflict of interest."

Of the 177 state legislators and six statewide office-holders, Jones and two other lawmakers were the only ones to get loans from their political funds during the last campaign-finance reporting cycle, a Sun-Times review found.

State Rep. Annazette Collins (D-Chicago) reported taking \$17,636 in loans from her political fund. Since 2001, she has received \$37,608 in campaign loans, none of which has been repaid, state campaign records show.

Collins faces a State Board of Elections investigation triggered by Canary's group for allegedly not reporting at least \$35,000 in contributions she took in over three years. Collins has since filed amended campaign reports to show contributions for that period.

State Rep. Edward Acevedo (D-Chicago) took \$5,000 in loans from his campaign fund last August. Since 1999, he has lent himself \$25,000 from his political contributions -- none of which has been repaid, state records show.

Illinois law was changed in 1998 to ban the personal use of campaign funds. But the law says nothing about loans. Under the personal-use prohibition, those in office in 1998 were permitted to spend whatever amount was in their political funds at the time.

For Jones, that amounted to \$577,605. He has not reported tapping into the fund for any money permitted under that exemption, leaving himself with a retirement nest egg that would be the envy of most of his constituents, whose median family income was \$52,458, according to the 2000 census.

*Dave McKinney and Carol Marin*

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