

Major ethics revision bill sails through Florida Senate committee

The unanimous vote for the measure gives it a bipartisan sheen.

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The Times-Union
Carlucci

Major provisions

Among the items in the ethics legislation passed by a Senate committee Tuesday:

- Outlaws gifts from lawmaker-controlled political fundraising committees
- Allows lawmakers to place assets in a blind to trust to avoid voting conflicts
- Prohibits a state lawmaker from voting on something that would result in them seeing a “special gain or loss”
- Would not allow a campaign complaint to be filed against a candidate 30 days before an election
- Allows the Florida Commission on Ethics to begin an investigation based on a referral from the governor, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, a state attorney or a U.S. attorney
- Prohibits a former lawmaker from lobbying any agency for two years after leaving office. Currently, former lawmakers are only prohibited from lobbying the Legislature.

By [Matt Dixon](#)

TALLAHASSEE - A Senate committee on Tuesday unanimously backed Florida's most sweeping ethics legislation in decades.

Though the vote by the Ethics and Elections Committee gave the bill a jolt of bipartisan support as it begins the legislative process, it could face opposition from local governments concerned with its scope.

"I think it reflects a lot of what the Florida Commission on Ethics has wanted," said Matt Carlucci, a former Jacksonville City Council member who sits on the commission.

The bill would allow the commission to file liens on property, or garnish the wages, of someone who doesn't pay fines for improperly filling out financial disclosure forms. After writing off nearly \$800,000 in fines last year, it was the commission's top legislative priority.

The legislation needs the approval of the Senate Rules Committee, chaired by John Thrasher, giving the St. Augustine Republican considerable sway over the process.

During Tuesday's nearly three-hour committee hearing, he expressed concern that the legislation would give the ethics commission the flexibility to define some terms in the bill.

"We are the ones crafting the legislation, so we should be defining some of its important terms," he said afterward.

Thrasher also was concerned about a provision allowing public officials to place their assets in a blind trust, which is managed by a third party to remove voting conflicts of interest. The public official is not allowed to communicate with the third party.

"I want to make sure we are not inadvertently violating something if you create a blind trust by discussing gains and losses in a portfolio" with a financial adviser, he said.

Gifts to and from lawmaker-controlled fundraising groups — known as committees of continence existence — would also be banned under the bill. The groups, which are only to be used for political fundraising, have come under fire after some lawmakers were using them for lavish meals and travel.

Under the proposed law, the committees only could be used for "legitimate expenses" tied to fundraising, but that still could include meals. Matthew Fox, the committee's top attorney, used the example of taking a candidate out for dinner that a lawmaker was considering giving a contribution.

"That would be a legitimate purpose," he said.

The Senate has taken the lead on ethic reform passage. A committee in the House tasked with that chamber's ethics review has yet to file legislation and will likely wait to see the Senate's final product, which has several remaining committee stops.

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