

## Enough, N.Y., of pay to play

By KAREN SCHARFF AND NICK NYHART

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Two top aides to the former state comptroller were just indicted. Unfortunately, that's only the most egregious example of Albany's pay-to-play culture.

The disturbing truth is that most of the pay-to-play transactions that drive state government decision making are completely legal. That's why public funding of elections has to be a top priority for the Legislature once the budget is formally passed.

On any night the Legislature is in town, a lobbyist is likely to attend multiple campaign fundraisers, spending \$250 to \$1,000, or much more, at each event. Walk into one of the events, and you will see lobbyists eating Swedish meatballs at their third fundraiser of the night, and taking turns talking to the senator about their clients' needs. That's Albany in March. Money and access, tied together night after night, leaving the rest of us to wonder what impact that money and access have on our state's policy and spending decisions.

Why did it take until this year to finally expand the bottle bill? The state desperately needs the money the new law will produce.

And what will happen after the state budget is approved? What about prescription drug bulk purchasing — will it be rejected again even though it could save \$100 million?

Will health care premiums continue to rise unchecked because the Legislature will not allow the state Insurance Department to regulate them? New Yorkers can no longer afford the current campaign finance system.

The cost of public funding of campaigns is tiny compared to the cost to taxpayers and consumers of the current system.

There's a simple way to reduce the level of influence corporate contributors hold over state policy. Public funding of campaigns would put the public back in control.

In Washington, the issue is back on the table, backed by powerful political leaders in a bipartisan effort to end the consuming chase for campaign cash at the federal level. Some form of public funding of campaigns has been enacted in 23 states and in New York City.

Most recently, Connecticut implemented voluntary full public funding of campaigns in last year's state legislative elections.

Eighty-one percent of the successful candidates used the new system and they ran for office in an entirely different way. They collected small donations from their constituents in order to qualify, and they received public funds to pay for most of the cost of their campaigns. Instead of spending their time dialing for dollars and sharing shrimp and carving stations with donors, they spent their time talking to average voters. As Connecticut comes to grips with its difficult fiscal crisis this year, lobbyists have fewer favors to call in than in years past.

New York's elected officials have no choice but to raise money from big donors if they want to get re-elected. A public funding system that gives all qualified candidates the option of running for office with small donations from supporters, combined with enough public funds to be competitive, can change elections and free legislators from the pressure of raising money from those who want special influence.

Many of our elected officials, including the legislative leaders, would prefer to have a publicly funded system, and not be forced to play the money game. In fact, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver sponsored a strong public funding bill last year and it passed the Assembly with overwhelming support.

Sen. Malcolm Smith, then the minority leader, sponsored a full public funding bill in 2008, and 17 of his colleagues joined him as co-sponsors. Now, as majority leader, Smith continues to strongly support public funding of campaigns. State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli also is a strong supporter of public funding of campaigns, believing as we do that the state cannot afford to continue the current private financing system.

Voters deserve to feel confident that state policy is being made in the interest of the public, without undue pressure from corporate donors looking for special breaks and benefits. We look forward to 2009 being the year New York state decides to replace the nightly Swedish meatballs with a voter-owned election system.

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