

*Nothing is politically right
that is morally wrong.*



*Free and fair discussion
is the firmest friend of truth.*

MISSOURI SENATE JEFFERSON CITY

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Shields Proposes Bill to Improve Ethics Standards ***Senate Leader Introduces Three Accountability and Transparency Measures***

JEFFERSON CITY – Offering new solutions to help improve Missouri’s ethical climate among elected officials, Senate Leader Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, today introduced legislation that would create the position of an independent investigator within the Ethics Commission, bar contributions to incumbent officials during session and expand income reporting requirements to include legislative staff. Senator Shields said he was spurred to propose the three-pronged bill after three elected officials resigned this year due to ethics violations.

“Ethics violations are unacceptable, especially because of the damage they cause to the public’s trust in our democratic process,” Sen. Shields said. “I believe we should continue to build on reforms we passed in 2007 by bringing even more transparency and accountability to the process in every way we can.”

The Senate bill, that will be assigned a number by the end of the day, would create the Office of Independent Investigation within the Ethics Commission to investigate potential ethics violations and file ethics complaints. Complaints filed by the office would continue to be handled in the same manner as they currently are handled.

“By creating this office, we would bring a new level of accountability to Missouri,” Sen. Shields said. “Currently, it is up to citizens to file complaints, but this would mean we would have a full-time independent office dedicated solely to investigating and filing ethics complaints.”

The measure would also bar lobbyists from contributing to any incumbent legislator’s candidate committee, incumbent governor’s candidate committee, any continuing committee, or any campaign committee during the regular session of the General Assembly that runs from January to May. The prohibition would also apply to any incumbent governor’s candidate committee or and any continuing or campaign committee when legislation from the regular session awaits gubernatorial action.

“We should work to avoid even the appearance of conflicts of interest and you can’t do that if you continue to allow campaign contributions while the Legislature is in session,” Sen. Shields said.

The only exemption in the bill would be for those incumbents seeking office in a special election. According to the legislation, a lobbyist is defined as someone who is employed to influence legislation on a regular basis.

The final provision would require all employees and staff of the General Assembly, including employees of the majority and minority caucuses of both chambers, to file yearly financial interest statements disclosing supplemental income received totaling \$5,000 or more. The disclosure must include the source of the income and the general nature of the business conducted.

“Because of the close nature and influence staff can have on the lawmakers they work for, we should hold our staff to the same standards of income disclosures that we as elected officials adhere to — adding an additional layer of accountability and transparency.”

A summary as well as full text of the bill will be available online at www.senate.mo.gov in the coming weeks. The 2010 Legislative Session begins on Wednesday, January 6, 2010.

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