



September 4, 2009

## NY Senate set to pass ethics reforms

*By Joseph Spector  
Albany Bureau*

ALBANY -- The state Senate next week is expected to pass legislation that aims to toughen oversight of lawmakers and the influence special-interest groups have with the Legislature.

The measures, which passed the Assembly in June, would scrap the much-maligned Commission on Public Integrity and replace it with three new commissions, which would independently oversee state lobbying activities, the Legislature and executive branch.

The bill also establishes an investigation office to oversee ethics in the Legislature and requires lobbyists to disclose business relationships with public officials. Lawmakers would have to disclose more information about their outside salaries and business dealings.

"I think it's the most sweeping change in ethics law in 20 years," said Blair Horner, legislative director for the New York Public Interest Research Group.

New York government has been plagued by ethical scandals that critics say have been fueled by weak laws.

The outcry for change, punctuated earlier this year by a damning investigation of the Public Integrity Commission, prompted the Democratic-led Assembly to pass the reforms before session ended in late June.

The measures stalled in the Senate, though, where a June 8 coup up-ended business for a month. Senate Democrats, who have regained the majority, plan to come back into session Thursday and pass the ethics package and other bills. Democrats hold a 32-30 seat majority.

"Senate Democrats realize that when we came into the majority (in January) we inherited an Albany that was mired in dysfunction," said Austin Shafran, spokesman for Senate Democrats. "We've taken steps thought the year to make the legislative process more open, transparent and inclusive."

Other items on the agenda include: confirmation of Jay Walder as head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority; creating a "Green Jobs/Green New York" program to make one million homes more energy efficient; and a measure to reduce greenhouse gases.

Senate Democratic Leader John Sampson, D-Brooklyn, submitted additional ethics legislation that would require Assembly approval.

The measures, Horner explained, would expand laws that control lobbying, require lawmakers' financial disclosure forms to be reviewed for accuracy, require public officials to detail business dealings with lobbyists and give the state Board of Elections greater investigative powers.

Melissa Mansfield, a spokeswoman for Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan, said the Assembly would review the Senate's additional provisions.

"The speaker would be very pleased if the Senate took up his bill and would be open to chapter amendments," she said. "He'd like to get this done this year."

---