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Gov bids to expose lawyer pols' \$ecrets

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ALBANY -- Legislators who moonlight for fat-cat law firms, such as top Dems Sheldon Silver and John Sampson, would be forced to make their client lists public under an ethics-reform package unveiled yesterday by Gov. Paterson.

The governor's proposal would, for the first time, require the state's 212 "part-time" lawmakers to detail all outside business relationships, including those who perform legal work on the side.

The plan comes two days after The Post revealed that Sampson, the Senate Democratic leader, recently joined a Manhattan personal-injury law firm with ties to the powerful trial lawyers lobby. Silver, the Assembly speaker, also has an oft-criticized side job as "of counsel" to a top law firm.

Paterson's ethics bill, which he plans to highlight in his State of the State Address today, rejects arguments that disclosing more about those relationships would violate attorney-client privilege.

"The general rule would be that clients would have to be disclosed," said Paterson's chief counsel, Peter Kiernan. "Just as when you get in court, it's all a matter of public record. We're just making it public somewhat earlier."

While lawyer-legislators don't have to reveal their clients, private businessmen serving in the Legislature must disclose with whom they do business if they are receiving checks directly from those clients.

However, a businessman could incorporate as a "consulting firm," for instance, in order to hide his clients, who make payments to the firm and not directly to the lawmaker.

A 2008 study by the New York Law Journal found 39 members of the 150-seat Assembly and 19 members of the 62-seat Senate have law degrees.

The sweeping legislation also would throw out the current ethics monitoring system and create a new commission to investigate everything from campaign-finance scofflaws to violations of open meetings law.

It contained two proposals similar to reforms advocated by Attorney General Andrew Cuomo: Giving the AG authority to probe corruption cases and creating a board to oversee the state's pension fund.

The bill would also strip pensions from public officials who have been convicted of a felony.

Lawmakers said the plan was unrealistic and faulted Paterson for not taking part in recent ethics talks. "If the governor is going to continue down this path, he's going to go down it alone," said one Senate Democrat.

Lawmakers have been scrambling to come up with an ethics deal since former Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno's federal corruption conviction last month.

Bruno had taken hundreds of thousands of dollars in consulting fees from companies with interests before the state -- but would not have been required to reveal his clients had he been a lawyer.

Proposals backed by Silver and Sampson would require lawmakers to provide greater detail about outside earnings, but would exempt lawyers -- the job held by the vast majority of legislators with outside work -- from detailing clients.

The governor's plan would allow the new ethics board to shield the names of clients in circumstances where disclosure might jeopardize their safety or right to fair representation.

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