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STATE NEWS

# Tampa Democrat To Lead Ethics Commission

## REFORM LAW VETO BUMPS CANDIDATE

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**TAMPA** — A Tampa Democrat, Thomas P. Scarritt Jr., has become chairman of the Florida Ethics Commission, instead of Tampa Republican John Grant, a change stemming in part from Gov. Jeb Bush's veto of a state ethics law reform bill.

Scarritt, a south Tampa lawyer and real estate developer, had been expected to become vice chairman of the commission, and Grant chairman, when the commission elected new officers Sept. 1.

Instead, Grant, one of the commission's founding members and a key player in the proposed revision of ethics laws, lost his seat and Scarritt was elected chairman.

The reason: State Sen. Tom Lee, a major proponent of the ethics legislation Bush vetoed, has insisted the Senate adhere to the legislation's provisions even though they weren't made law.

Among those provisions is a prohibition on registered lobbyists — such as Grant — serving on the commission.

Because the Senate must confirm appointments to the commission, and because Lee's authority as Senate president gives him effective veto power over any Senate action, he has the clout to enforce such a policy.

Grant said he could have remained on the commission had the law passed because its effective date, Oct. 1, would have been after his reappointment.

Lee said otherwise.

The effective date is "a technicality as far as I'm concerned," he said. "The minute that legislation passed the Senate and House of Representatives, there was never going to be another lobbyist appointed to the ethics commission, period."

Grant was angry, and Lee said he was "concerned and surprised" by Bush's veto.

### The Law's Intent

Long in the making, the law was intended to modernize, tighten and make consistent the restrictions on "revolving door" moves by state officials into jobs with private firms that lobby state government.

Grant last week accused Bush of vetoing the law to preserve staff members' ability



Scarritt  
South Tampa  
lawyer, developer  
will take  
reins of panel.

to move into lucrative lobbying jobs when Bush leaves office next year.

"I was very sorry to see the governor veto it," Grant said. "I think he made a terrible mistake. I have to think some staff people were protecting their right to go out and cash their chips in next year."

Bush spokeswoman Alia Faraj acknowledged that prospects for state officials were a concern, as Bush noted in his veto message.

In that message, Bush said the prohibition was too broad and "could have a Draconian impact" on recruiting state employees who might later want to seek private jobs.

Scarritt, 48, was appointed to the commission last year by former state House Speaker Johnnie Byrd, a Republican. By state law, the commission is split between parties.

Its work, investigating charges of ethical violations by state and local public officials, "is not partisan, it's just en-



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proper

forcing the law," Scarritt said. It can recommend penalties including fines, reprimands or removal from office.

Scarritt said that as chairman he hopes to explore ways to increase efficiency, including appointing a committee of outside experts to recommend new operating procedures.

He said he has admired Grant's work on the commission and would have been happy to serve as his vice chairman.

A longtime Democratic Party stalwart, Scarritt has been an active fundraiser for Democratic candidates, including Tampa's Betty Castor in her 2004 Senate race and U.S. Rep. Jim Davis, also of Tampa, in his current race for governor.

Grant, a former state senator, said the law was intended to apply the same "cooling-off period" to executive branch officials that applies to former legislators and legislative employees, a two-year period before they can lobby.

Under current law, legislators can't lobby the Legislature for two years after leaving office, and executive branch officials can't lobby the agency where they worked for two years.

The vetoed law would have added a provision that executive branch workers can't lobby any state agency on any matter they worked on while in office.

### Governor's Veto

Bush said that prohibition was too broad, and he objected to an exemption in the bill for people who were hired under the state's civil service system but later were moved into the "selected exempt" category — generally a category for higher-level, policy-making officials. As governor, Bush has moved many state employees from civil service to the exempt category.

"Florida's lobbying laws should be applied uniformly," Bush said. "Creating exemptions sets a bad precedent."

Bonnie Williams, executive director of the Ethics Commission, said the exemption was fair because the former civil service employees "were hired under one set of rules, and this would have changed those

rules and what they could expect to do."

The same kind of "grandfathering" approach is included in current restrictions on legislative employees, she said.

Grant noted that some of the language Bush objected to in the bill was produced by the Public Corruption Study Commission that Bush himself appointed in 1999, soon after he took office.

Lee, a Brandon Republican who is running for chief financial officer, has said that tightening state restrictions on lobbyists, who he believes have too much influence on the Legislature, was one of his priorities as Senate president.

Some of his goals, including removing lobbyists from the Board of Governors of the state university system, have been enacted. Others, including his wish to force lobbyists to reveal what they spend lobbying legislators, haven't.

"It's a longstanding feeling of mine that it's a conflict of interest to have people who make a living in the legislative process passing judgment in a legal setting over legislators," he said of the ethics bill.

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