

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

and The Tampa Times

OUR OPINION

Lobbyists Should Not Sit On State Governing Boards

Gov. Jeb Bush may have vetoed legislation proposing state ethics reforms, but Senate President Tom Lee says he will use his position to make sure the Senate will adhere to the legislation's provisions even though they didn't become law.

Good for him. If he can keep lobbyists from serving in policy-making positions on state governing boards without a law, he should. Lee made passage of the law a priority during the legislative session because he believes lobbyists have too much influence on the Legislature.

But Bush killed the measure, objecting to a provision that would have made officials who work for the executive branch wait two years before they can lobby. The restriction already applies to the legislative branch.

Bush said the provision would hurt efforts to recruit state employees who may later move to private firms that lobby state government.

But the reasonable restraint hasn't harmed the Legislature. Top businesses frequently require employees to sign a no-compete agreement that limits future employment opportunities.

It appears the governor simply wants to make sure his staff can cash in before and after he leaves office.

Regardless of the veto, Lee is intent on removing lobbyists from governing

boards and since the Senate must approve appointments, he exerts considerable clout. His stand even cost fellow Republican John Grant the chairmanship of the state ethics commission. Lee's legislation would have prevented registered lobbyists from sitting on the ethics commission.

Grant, a former state senator, registered lobbyist and founding member of the commission, supported the legislation. But he thought he could get around the prohibition since his appointment came before the law would have taken effect.

But Lee had made clear, regardless of the timing of the appointment or the governor's veto, he'll use his legislative authority to make sure the prohibition applies to everyone.

"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," Lee said.

So Grant, who has been an effective member of the commission is out, and Tampa lawyer Tom Scarritt, a Democrat, has assumed the chairmanship.

Lee's message is clear and uncompromising. He wants ethics reform, no exceptions. It's too bad the governor doesn't appear as committed to freeing state government from such precarious entanglements.

Lee's message is clear and uncompromising. He wants ethics reform, no exceptions.



Lee