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COMMENTARY

'Cool off' between legislative jobs

GUEST COMMENTARY

Mark
Hass

Your state senator or representative is working for you in the halls of the Oregon legislature today. Tomorrow he or she may be representing a special interest in those same halls as a lobbyist.

I have a problem with that arrangement. The legislature should not be a stepping stone for someone looking for a lucrative job as a lobbyist. There should be a clean break — call it a cooling-off period — between representing the people and representing special interest groups.

House Speaker Mark Simmons raised this ethical cloud recently by accepting a job as political affairs director for the Oregon Association of Nurserymen. He plans to continue serving as Speaker of the House while working for the nurserymen, although he has said he will not lobby members of the Legislature until next session — when he will no longer be a sitting lawmaker.

Don't get me wrong. Mark Simmons is a decent guy who is just trying to make a living. But there is a larger question here. Should special interest groups have the ability to purchase the connections and influence of a legislator while that legislator is still in office?

Under the current system, a law-

maker could be "interviewing" for a lobby job while he or she is still in office, in effect doing favors for the prospective employer. I think that stinks to high heaven.

Twenty-seven other states have already put the brakes on this potential for trouble by banning lawmakers from immediately becoming paid lobbyists after they leave office. Oregon should add its name to this list and prevent legislators from lobbying their former colleagues for two years. Making them sit out for at least one full legislative session may deter special influence groups from trying to buy their way into our representative system of democracy.

Oregon already has a similar ban for administrators of regulatory agencies, such as the Oregon Lottery and the Department of Consumer Affairs and Business. They can't lobby or represent a group with business before the agency for two years after leaving their job.

More than 20 former legislators lobbied the Oregon Legislature during the 2001 session, according to

the Portland-based Money in Politics Research Action Project. Five had left office within the previous year. I'm not questioning the integrity of these people. But appearance is important if we want to restore trust in our government officials.

The public is already jaded about government. Just the suspicion that legislators spend time ingratiating themselves with prospective employers is like pouring grease into a hot fire. Jumping from the legislature to the lobby feeds into the very cynicism that keeps people from voting.

The legislature can take a big step toward reversing this cynicism by passing the Revolving Door Act to assure citizens their leaders are looking out for them — not looking for a new job.

The Revolving Door Act is drafted and ready to go when the legislature convenes. In fact, it could have been considered in our recent special legislative session. But under Oregon House rules, permission is required for all legislation before it can be introduced in a special session.

Sadly, the Speaker of the House never granted that permission.

Mark Hass, Class of '80, is a state representative whose district includes Raleigh Hills, part of Beaverton in Washington County and part of southwest Multnomah County.

Letter to the editor

University community invited to attend hearing

Will the Moss-Columbia-Villard neighborhood be razed? Do you care

about this idyllic 12 blocks owned and neglected by the University?

It is possible that the right thing will happen to these blocks and the families living in them, but it is far more likely if your opinion is heard.

Please take the time to attend the hearing on July 24 at 5 p.m. at City Hall or submit written comments to the City of Eugene Planning Office anytime before the hearing.

Zachary Vishanoff
Eugene

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