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House Democrats offer expansive proposals to reform government

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – House Democrats on Tuesday announced a wide-ranging package of reforms to improve accountability and integrity in state government. House Democrats have aggressively pursued accountability legislation for several years but have encountered resistance from majority Republicans. House Minority Leader Paul LeVota, D-Independence, said the situation could be different this year.

“Ending the government-for-sale culture in the Missouri Capitol hasn’t been a priority for majority Republicans or the current administration,” LeVota said. “But Matt Blunt may not be governor much longer, and we expect the next administration will be more receptive to restoring accountability to state government. Republican lawmakers can either join us in taking the lead on reform this year or they can be followers next year.”

To address the pay-to-play system in securing appointments to influential state boards and commissions, state Rep. Beth Low, D-Kansas City, is again sponsoring the Gubernatorial Appointments Integrity Act, which would prohibit appointees from donating to political campaigns during their terms in office. The bill, which Low filed as HB 540 last year, is patterned after restrictions already in place for state judges under the Missouri Constitution and Supreme Court rule.

“Unelected gubernatorial appointees, much like judges, hold positions of power and public trust,” Low said. “It looks like a payoff when appointees make big donations to the governor to whom they owe their positions. Appointees should be chosen based on merit and skill, not the size of their bank accounts.”

Although governors of both parties have accepted donations from appointees, Low said that doesn’t justify the practice. Blunt has brought pay-to-play to new depths, having received at least \$1.13 million from appointees or their families since taking office in January 2005. Perhaps the most suspicious contribution came from Rudolph Farber of Neosho, whom Blunt appointed to the powerful State Highways and Transportation Commission in March 2007 -- just 15 days after Farber gave \$50,000 to the governor’s campaign.

To close the revolving door between elected office and lucrative lobbying jobs, state Rep. Jake Zimmerman, D-Olivette, is filing a bill that would prohibit lawmakers, statewide elected officials or members of their staffs from working as paid lobbyists within one year after leaving office or state employment.

“Missourians lose their faith in government when the people they elect to serve their interests suddenly end up on the payroll of special interest groups,” Zimmerman said. “This is especially true of the General Assembly, where in recent years several influential lawmakers have resigned early to become lobbyists. Elected officials are there to serve the public, not set themselves up for lucrative careers.”

House Democrats’ agenda also includes an innovative plan by state Rep. Rachel Storch, D-St. Louis to remove partisanship from the legislative redistricting process. Storch filed an identical proposal, HJR 27, last year.

“The redistricting process currently serves the interests of political parties -- not voters -- and undermines the basic principles of representative democracy,” Storch said. “The partisan gerrymander is a tradition of American politics Missouri can do without.”

Under Storch’s proposal, Missouri’s congressional districts and state House and Senate districts would be drawn by the state Demographic and Statistical Unit within the Office of Administration. With the aid of computer drafting programs, the state demographers would be required to follow detailed, geographically based criteria without regard to partisan concerns. As much as possible, districts would have to be geographically compact and not divide cities or counties unless necessary.

Mapmakers would be prohibited from taking into account four criteria that currently drive partisan redistricting in Missouri and other states: 1. Incumbents’ addresses; 2. Political affiliations of registered voters; 3. Previous election results; and 4. Demographic information other than actual head counts or information required to be considered by federal law. Federally required information that still would be considered includes racial demographics necessary to ensure that minority voting strength isn’t diluted either by carving up minority populations to make election of minority candidates unlikely or compacting minority voters into a small number of districts.

The Missouri Constitution currently assigns the duty of drawing congressional districts to the General Assembly. Partisan commissions have first crack at statehouse redistricting. If those commissions -- one responsible for crafting Senate districts, the other for House districts -- fail to agree, the job is given to a panel of appellate judges. The 2001 partisan redistricting commissions deadlocked, forcing a judicial panel to do the job.

Although the next redistricting cycle doesn’t occur until 2011, House Democrats are working to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot this year. Voter ratification of the amendment this year would give the state more time to prepare for the new redistricting process than if it appeared on the 2010 ballot.

On the issue of campaign finance reform, LeVota is sponsoring a bill that would hold political party committees to the same

As they have for several years, House Democrats are seeking to end political patronage in the awarding of license fee office contracts by requiring contracts to be granted either to local public school foundations or charitable organizations or by competitive bid. State Rep. Luke Scavuzzo, D-Harrisonville, will sponsor the bill, which will be similar to HB 638 from last year.

Party campaign contributions limits as individual donors. Party committees currently can give 10 times the normal limits, which range from \$325 to \$1,275 depending on the office sought. Because party committees can give more, wealthy donors routinely funnel money through them to circumvent the limits on individual contributions.

“The current law leaves a loophole big enough to drive a Brinks truck through,” LeVota said. “The campaign money Laundromat needs to be closed.”