

STATE & REGION

THOMAS SUDES



COMMENTARY

Ethics bill travels unethical passage

COLUMBUS

The Ohio Constitution says Ohio House members must be at least age 18. But, as confirmed by last week's debate on a legislative ethics bill, nowhere in the constitution does it say House members must act like adults.

Because his local newspaper has already had its customary sport with him, we'll leave for another day the bellyaching of Rep. Wayne Jones, D-46, of Cuyahoga Falls, who denounced the ethics bill as simply the evil spawn of agitation by Ohio's newspapers.

Even then, you have to wonder how sincere Jones was. After he practically called the ethics bill a load of crap, Jones voted for it anyway. And General Assembly members still wonder why voters are cynical?

Two House members did walk their talk: Reps. Joseph F. Kozlura, D-61, of Lorain, and Jack Cera, D-99, of Bellaire, voted no even as Jones and 96 fellow "lemmings" plunged noisily into the sea.

The ridiculous feature of last week's debate is that the bill, now on its way to Gov. George V. Voinovich's desk, is hardly radical.

What's more, overdue though the ethics bill was, it wouldn't even have been proposed if legislators of both parties and chambers had been less greedy — or more discreet.

Meanwhile, it's a Spandex-class stretch to question, as Koziura has, why the \$25,000 campaign donations Voinovich accepts are considered "good government" but drinks and a meal a lobbyist furnishes a legislator are "corruption."

First, as a Voinovich aide quickly said, the \$25,000 donations Voinovich accepts are for his campaign, not personal expenses.

Second, though the aide didn't say this, Voinovich couldn't accept any \$25,000 donations if the General Assembly would just reform Ohio's laughable, oodles-of-boodle campaign-finance laws.

A bipartisan House-Senate conference, chaired by State Sen. (and future congressman) Robert R. Cupp, R-12, of Lima, does seem to be plugging away at trying to fashion a fair campaign-finance compromise.

But even that could founder if Voinovich, playing footsie with the usual hard-faced industrialists, keeps making his bull-headed (and factually absurd) claim that corporate Ohio is threatened by organized labor's political power.

Yeah, thanks to AFL-CIO donations, Ohio is a workers' paradise: That must be why the state's ceiling on consumer credit interest charges, the "usury rate," is still a breathtaking 25% — a "temporary law" adopted in 1981. And why Ohio's workers' compensation system is the envy of the world.

Legislators grouching about the ethics bill have only themselves to blame. For 20 years they dithered and dallied over ethics and campaign reform. Then, when the clouds burst, they cursed the skies, like a homeowner who won't fix shingles, then blames the Weather Service for leaks.

Yes, only an idiot would say that, in exchange for a \$500 "speaking fee" or a \$5,000 campaign donation, a legislator will necessarily vote the donor's way. True, some creeps in other states have been caught doing just that. But, generally, life is more complex and subtle.

What's really at issue may be, as one recent study suggested, the psychological dynamics of giving and receiving gifts.

For example: Your kid has a birthday. A family up the block sends an unsolicited gift. Months later, that family asks you to sign a petition agreeing to a zoning variance to, say, expand its garage.

You'd be justifiably insulted if anyone said your signature was a pay-off for the toy your child got. But on some level, probably unconsciously, the gift created a reciprocal obligation, if only of amiable neighborliness.

That's why, although gifts (and borrowed tools) may create animity in any neighborhood, in Columbus or Anytown, Ohio's pending and enacted ethics reforms impose caps and limits.

Because while Christmas cookies and neighbor-plowed sidewalks can be pleasant, "Good fences," as Robert Frost wrote, "make good neighbors" too.

Sudes is legislative correspondent for The Plain Dealer.

McDonald forgot about lobby cash

By VINDU P. GOEL
PLAIN DEALER BUREAU

COLUMBUS

McDonald & Co. Securities Inc. said yesterday that it paid \$10,000 to 20 state lawmakers last year for attending meetings with company officials — and somehow forgot to report a dime.

The Cleveland-based brokerage firm also raised \$15,500 in campaign contributions two months ago for the man who is supposed to enforce the reporting laws: Ohio Attorney General Lee I. Fisher.

Fisher spokesman Rob Biesenbach said yesterday that Fisher's office wasn't currently investigating the McDonald payments. But the office is conducting a "preliminary inquiry" into seven other organizations that similarly violated

the lobbyist disclosure laws, as outlined in The Plain Dealer last fall.

"The contributions received by the attorney general's campaign last November won't deter us in any way from conducting an investigation," Biesenbach said. "We feel it will be fairly easy to determine the facts of these cases."

McDonald has acknowledged that it "inadvertently" failed to obey the law that requires lobbyists to report the total amount spent on lawmakers. Details don't have to be reported unless the amount totals more than \$500 per lawmaker per year, although that will change under a new ethics law passed last week.

The company filed revised 1993 expense reports yesterday, showing \$10,119.50 spent from Jan. 1 to

Aug. 31. Virtually all of the cash was used to pay \$500 honoraria to each of 20 lawmakers, 18 of whom attended "educational seminars" with McDonald executives last June.

McDonald said one of the payments was inadvertently made to a lawmaker who was invited to the June meetings but never attended. "The funds have been returned," the company said.

McDonald spokesman Richard Clark said the company would not identify any of the legislators involved.

However, the company did announce yesterday that it would stop making campaign contributions in Ohio and would dissolve its political action committee.

McDonald will also join most of

the nation's securities firms in a voluntary ban on employee contributions to the political campaign of any public official who could influence lucrative bond deals.

"We felt we needed to take some actions to clear the air," Clark said. Clark said he didn't know whether McDonald's new policy would prevent its president, William B. Summers Jr., from raising money for Fisher, like he did last fall.

Summers and other McDonald executives hosted a breakfast fund-raiser for Fisher on Nov. 29 at the Union Club in Cleveland, said Mary Beth Cooper, director of Fisher's re-election campaign.

Cooper said the event raised \$15,500 — most of it from McDonald employees. Summers personally contributed \$2,000.

Fisher volunteered the information about the campaign event yesterday, saying he felt he should disclose it under the circumstances.

Although the attorney general has legal authority to conduct his own probe, Biesenbach said Fisher wouldn't officially examine the reporting violations of McDonald or any other organization unless he receives a formal request from the state agency that oversees lobbyist filings — the Joint Committee on Agency Rule Review.

The joint committee's executive director, Thomas Sherman, said he was waiting for guidance from the 10 House and Senate members who sit on the committee, including at least one senator who accepted \$500 from McDonald: State Sen. Robert W. Ney, R-20, of St. Clairsville.

Campaign finance reform bill nudged

By THOMAS SUDES
PLAIN DEALER BUREAU

COLUMBUS

If a pending campaign-finance reform bill remains stalled past mid-March in the General Assembly, GOP Secretary of State Bob Taft said he may join in a voter-initiated ballot issue to bypass Statehouse gridlock.

"I am concerned that campaign reform may get bogged down in election-year politics," said Taft, who is seeking a second four-year term as Ohio's chief elections officer. Taft's Democratic re-election foe is likely to be Cleveland City Councilman Dan Brady.

"I'm getting more and more interested in supporting a ballot issue," Taft said.

A bipartisan Senate-House conference chaired by Sen. Robert R. Cupp, R-12, of Lima, is trying to reconcile rival versions of a Senate campaign-finance bill that the GOP-led Senate approved last March 23 and the Democrat-led House rewrote last July 1.

For the first time in Ohio, the bill would impose limits on contributions to candidates running for statewide office. Cupp said yesterday that he remains optimistic that conferees can craft a compromise bill acceptable to both political parties and legislative chambers.

"It's just a matter of trying to get (the bill) together," said Cupp, who declined to predict a timetable, saying conferees would produce a compromise "as soon as we can."

Taft said he believes legislators are diligently seeking a compromise, and he lauded recent approval by both the Senate and the House of a House-proposed legislative ethics bill, sponsored by Reps. Randy Weston, D-90, of Morral, and Karen Doty, D-45, of Akron.

Taft said it's in the General Assembly's interest to design a campaign-reform bill because a plan written directly by angry voters could be void of any legislative input.

"That's a lesson of term limits," Taft said.

Taft said he isn't setting a deadline for legislative action but noted, in response to a question, that the Senate and House are expected to recess by or after the May primary election.

Taft said he is uncertain whether a campaign-reform ballot issue, if that's the necessary path, should be a constitutional amendment, such as 1992's successful term-limits initiative, or a voter-initiated law.

Voters can propose a constitutional amendment without any legislative action, while the General Assembly gets first crack at an initiated law. As a trade-off, an initiated law requires fewer voter signatures than a voter-initiated constitutional amendment.

Common Cause Ohio and allied groups have been discussing a voter-initiated ballot issue to cap campaign donations made to Ohio candidates. Ohio imposes no limits now.

A Common Cause spokeswoman couldn't be reached yesterday for comment, but the group has previously indicated it may propose a \$100 per-candidate donation ceiling.

Taft said he believes a \$100 donation-cap would protect incumbents, while a \$1,000 limit, already imposed for 20 years on federal candidates, seems to work well. Taft himself has proposed limiting donations to statewide candidates, such as himself, to \$5,000 per election — limits he said he'll voluntarily observe.

Balanced-budget alert sounded

COLUMBUS

The Ohio Senate yesterday sent Washington a message.

Senators approved a resolution, sponsored by State Sen. H. Cooper Snyder, R-14, of Hillsboro, asking Congress to either propose a federal balanced budget amendment or to call a federal convention to propose such an amendment.

Snyder is running for Congress this year, as is State Sen. Robert Ney, R-20, of St. Clairsville, who opposed Snyder's resolution because of the possibility of a "run-away convention."

Also speaking was State Sen. Robert Burch, D-30, of Dover, a

Democratic gubernatorial candidate, who said Snyder's resolution was a "colossal waste of time."

Snyder said 29 of the needed 34 states had asked Congress for a convention. The Democrat-led Ohio House would also have to pass Snyder's resolution before Congress could entertain it. House passage is considered unlikely.

By one vote, the Senate nixed an amendment to Snyder's resolution. The amendment, proposed by Senate Minority Leader Robert J. Boggs, D-18, of Jefferson, and supported by Ney, asked Congress itself to act, rather than call a convention.

— Thomas Sudes



Sole-ful eyes

Molson the dog is a collector. Molson's owner, Cyndi Dreim of Green Oak Township, Mich., is a decorator — of sorts — hanging shoes her dog has collected on a roadside tree so neighbors can recover their belongings.

Big guns take aim at school vouchers

By MARY BETH LANE
PLAIN DEALER BUREAU

COLUMBUS

Public educators are taking no chances with legislation that would spend Ohio tax dollars on vouchers to send students to private schools.

They've formed a powerful coalition aimed at defeating the bills, which are backed by Gov. George V. Voinovich's administration.

Although one legislative sponsor has speculated that the House bill may be doomed, opponents are keeping the heat on. "I don't know that it's DOA (dead on arrival) in the House," said Sue Gatton, president of the Ohio PTA.

Gatton announced yesterday the formation of the coalition, Ohio Parents and Teachers Association and Citizens Against Vouchers, to fight legislation pending in the House and the Senate.

The education establishment's big guns have been brought

Parallel bills, sponsored by Sen. H. Cooper Snyder, R-14, of Hillsboro, and Rep. Michael A. Fox, R-59, of Hamilton, would give parents a voucher to send their child to a private or a public school

aboard for the assault, including two teachers unions, the state Board of Education and the local school boards and school superintendents associations.

Parallel bills, sponsored by Sen. H. Cooper Snyder, R-14, of Hillsboro, and Rep. Michael A. Fox, R-59, of Hamilton, would give parents a voucher to send their child to a private or a public school.

If approved, the program would begin next year as a two-year, \$25 million experiment in a small number of school districts. There is no estimate yet on how many of Ohio's 1.8 million public school students would participate.

school that stands to benefit most: the inner-city, minority child," she said.

Most of the Catholic elementary school's 357 students are from poor families who struggle to pay the \$975 tuition, Harris said. Another 125 children are on the waiting list.

Gatton and other foes say diverting state money to private education will decimate the public school system.

"Public education is already underfunded," Gatton said yesterday. "Taking much-needed taxpayer dollars away from public to private schools makes no sense."

Voucher supporters argue that public education might work better with some competition.

"Where there's competition, everyone will do a better job," Harris said. "It works in business."

Senate hearings have begun in the Education, Retirement and Aging Committee, which Snyder chairs. The Republican-controlled

Senate is expected to greet the voucher plan more cordially than the Democrat-ruled House.

In the House, Fox argued unsuccessfully to refer the bill to the Finance and Appropriations Committee, chaired by State Rep. Ronald V. Gerberry, D-65, of Canfield, a voucher foe. Gerberry said yesterday that he plans to begin hearings soon.

"That gives it a limited shelf life in the House," Fox said. "Very few reform measures survive the Education Committee."

Gerberry said it was unfair for Fox to suggest he will kill the bill in committee.

"One thing I am, I'm pretty fair," he said.