

Ethics bill on Senate plate?

Tighter donor limits possible; session is likely for Sept. 10

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ALBANY -- The state Senate is poised to come back to the Capitol on Sept. 10, working on an agenda that might include passage of an ethics bill and approval of some key nominations by Gov. David Paterson.

"There are discussions among the leadership and in the conference about potentially taking up ethics legislation," said Austin Shafran, spokesman for Democratic Senate President Malcolm Smith.

No date had been officially set as of late Thursday, but Shafran said Senate leadership had spent the day querying lawmakers about setting Sept. 10 as a session day.

The Assembly passed an ethics bill at the end of the legislative session in June. But the Senate, which became embroiled in its now-infamous coup, never got to take up such a measure.

The coup, in which Democrats Pedro Espada Jr. and Hiram Monserrate threw the Senate into a month of chaos when they switched sides and joined with Republicans only to be brought back to the Democratic fold, has led to ongoing criticism of the Senate's own ethics.

Recent revelations by the Times Union about how Senate Democrats have handed out raises and salaries for new personnel have heightened the belief that ethics guidelines need tightening.

The Assembly measure called for the creation of a new entity to oversee lobbying, and another to watch the executive branch. It also called for a Legislative Commission on Ethics Standards -- but its members would be appointed by legislative leaders, a structure that has been criticized by reform advocates. Additionally, the Assembly's plan called for more detailed financial disclosure by lawmakers.

Shafran said it wasn't clear what ethics rule changes the Senate might consider, but Sen. Liz Krueger, D-Manhattan, has called for lowering contribution limits for firms that

do business with the state. Sen. Daniel Squadron, D-Brooklyn, wants lawmakers to provide more disclosure about their business relationships.

Additionally, Paterson has called for closing the state Commission on Public Integrity and replacing it with a new commission in which the governor would have less power over appointments.

If senators approve ethics overhaul, they might have to meet in conference committee with the Assembly to develop a bill that would pass both houses.

In addition to ethics, senators could approve nominees such as Jay Walder, Paterson's choice to head the Metropolitan Transit Authority.