

Spoken 3/25/13

TOM FOLEY REMARKS AT THE PUBLIC HEARING FOR SB 727

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am here this morning to give my very strong support to SB 727, "An Act Concerning Conflicts of Interest Under the Code of Ethics for Public Officials and State Employees." Or, more simply, the "Clean Government" bill.

Frankly, I wish I didn't need to be here today. Instead, I wish the Connecticut legislature had long ago imposed ethical standards on itself that most other states and the federal government consider minimum thresholds for earning the public trust. But that is not the case.

SB 727 is a simple, straightforward bill. The bill prohibits a legislator from receiving more than \$1,000 from an organization that benefits from state spending – for example, state contractors, lobbying firms, and public employee unions.

To any reasonable person, receiving such payments is a clear and serious conflict of interest. In fact, it is so clear that most Connecticut citizens are shocked when they learn that what is prohibited under SB 727 is not already prohibited under Connecticut law.

It is absurd that someone on the payroll of a public employee union or a firm that lobbies state legislators can serve in our General Assembly. At least a lot of people elsewhere think it absurd because, in most states and in Washington, DC, a legislator could go to jail for what is regularly done and perfectly legal in Connecticut. That is because what is okay around our Capitol is considered a bribe in most places.

It is so off the mark, in fact, that I am surprised lobbyists are able to make a living in Connecticut. Why would anyone hire a lobbyist when you can just put a legislator on your payroll!

For far too long Connecticut has been the butt of jokes about political corruption. Every few years the moniker "Corrupticut" is again raised in response to yet another scandal. It is no wonder when we have laws that permit flagrant conflicts

of interest between public officials and the state's citizens – and it all is done with a wink and a nod from one's colleagues in government. Let's put an end to it.

Part of the problem is that the foxes are running the hen house. Our ethics rules start off as "ethics light" and then, on appeal, everyone is given a pass because "people have a right to earn a living". That's the same argument you hear when you go to a foreign country and the police demand a bribe with the excuse that they are not paid enough. That may be true, but it is still a bribe. And in most of those countries, unlike here, it is illegal. This is Connecticut. We are part of the United States of America. Let's make this sleazy practice illegal here, too.

If a legislator can't earn a living with someone other than a public employee union, state contractor or lobbying firm, they probably are not qualified to be a legislator. Serving in the legislature or in state government is a privilege, not a right. Those unable to serve without conflicts of interest should not be allowed to serve. Under this bill they won't be.

Connecticut's citizens deserve higher standards than we have today in our Capitol. I urge this committee and the General Assembly to pass SB 727 and remove this stain on our state government. I also call on Governor Malloy to get behind this bill and follow through on his commitment to bring more transparency to his administration.

A vote against this bill is a vote against good government. So I appeal to the highest principles in each of you and your colleagues in the General Assembly in asking that you do the right thing and support this bill. And, please, demand that any legislator who does not support this bill explain to us why he or she is against clean government in Connecticut.

Thank you.