

House approves sweeping ethics reform bill

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

SALEM, Ore. — The last major bill of the 74th Legislative Assembly cleared the Oregon House of Representatives yesterday on a 40-18 vote. The Oregon Ethics Reform Act, SB 10, sets strict limits on gift to public officials and increases the penalty for violations. The new ethics requirements apply to all public officials in Oregon, not just to legislators.

“Restoring the public’s faith in their elected leaders starts with a strong ethical standard,” said House Speaker Jeff Merkley (D-Portland), who carried the bill during floor debate. “When our constituents see us receive exotic vacations and expensive dinners, they wonder if their interests are really being served here. They wonder if their voice is as important as someone giving a lavish gift. Today, we’re putting an end to that.”

The bill also dedicates funding to the Government Ethics Commission, formerly known as the Government Standards and Practices Commission, through an assessment on all public bodies.

In recent years, the legislature has trimmed funding for the commission through the normal budget process. That has left the commission without enough resources to fulfill its mandate.

The dedicated funding source will correct that problem.

“Oregonians deserve a more ethical and transparent government,” said Rep. Diane Rosenbaum (D-Portland), chair of the House Elections Ethics and Rules Committee. “They rightfully hold their leaders to a higher standard. With these substantive ethics reforms, we can make sure public officials are living up to it.”

The bill calls for an aggregate \$50 limit on gifts of food, lodging and items of value to a public official from any one source in a year, if the person giving the gift has business before the public official’s board or agency. It raises the maximum penalty for violations from \$1000 to \$5000.

The House added an outright ban on gifts of entertainment, like sporting events or concerts, to the version that passed the Senate.

House changes also require the ethics commission to further clarify the definition of a "gift" and to make recommendations every two years on needed adjustments to the ethics statutes. In addition, House amendments add a "revolving door" provision that prevents officials from leaving public service and immediately going to work for corporations with whom they previously negotiated contracts and business deals.

"This issue goes to the heart of how we serve the citizens of this state," Merkley said.

The Oregon Ethics Reform Act will go back to the Senate for concurrence and then on to Governor Kulongoski for his signature. It will take effect immediately after the governor signs the bill.

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