



CITY HALL NEWS POLITICS

City Council approves ban on aldermen lobbying state, local governments

This is the second round of ethics reforms approved since Mayor Lori Lightfoot took office.

By Fran Spielman | Dec 18, 2019, 1:56pm CDT



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With federal investigators swarming all around them, the City Council tried again Wednesday to prove legendary alderman Paddy Bauler was wrong when he said,

“Chicago ain’t ready for reform.”

The second round of ethics reforms since Mayor Lori Lightfoot took office is tailor-made to end the days of “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch your back” — at least when it comes to City Hall lobbying.

The ordinance approved Wednesday without debate would prohibit Chicago aldermen from lobbying state and local government and prevent their counterparts at those other levels from doing the same at City Hall.

Aviation Committee Chairman Matt O’Shea (19th) and Ethics Chairman Michele Smith (43rd) co-sponsored the ordinance in an attempt to stay one step ahead of the burgeoning lobbying scandal swirling around Commonwealth Edison and video gaming interests pushing to legalize sweepstakes machines.

“We’ve seen, historically, that there has been an issue of cross-lobbying — sort of a reciprocity — that can lead to a corrupt system. And we’ve seen some examples of it,” Smith told the Chicago Sun-Times earlier this month.

“We think the time to act is right now to take a stand in this new City Council that we will not allow that. ... We’re trying to end the notion of, ‘You scratch my back. I’ll scratch your back.’”

Smith didn’t name names. But Ethics Board Chairman William Conlon did.

The ordinance is driven by the scandal surrounding now-former state Rep. Luis Arroyo, D-Chicago, who resigned last month, one week after his arrest on a federal bribery charge.

Arroyo was accused of paying a bribe to a state senator — identified by the Sun-Times as state Sen. Terry Link — in exchange for support of a gambling bill that would have benefitted one of Arroyo’s lobbying clients. Link has emphatically denied the charge.

“When a state legislator like [Luis] Arroyo comes and lobbies the city of Chicago while the city of Chicago is requesting needed state financial aid, there is, I think, the appearance of impropriety in that,” Conlon said.

“At least it can create the impression of undue pressure or undue influence.”

Attorneys seeking “administrative or legislative action in connection with any zoning matter” before the city, county, state or other units of local government would be exempt.

Ald. Gilbert Villegas (36th), Lightfoot’s City Council floor leader, was among the roughly 30 aldermen co-signing the proposed lobbying ban.

Last year, Villegas introduced an ordinance that went nowhere that would have legalized sweepstakes machines in Chicago **after being lobbied by James T. Weiss**, a son-in-law of former Cook County Assessor and Democratic Party Chairman Joe Berrios.

Weiss owns and operates sweepstakes machines. His lobbying efforts are part of the federal criminal case against Arroyo.

In October, Commonwealth Edison cut ties with a lobbying firm co-owned by Villegas.

Villegas has insisted he never lobbied anybody, did no work for ComEd and started “making moves to divest” himself from Stratagem, the company he formed with Elgin City Council member Baldemar Lopez, when the Chicago City Council voted in July to impose new restrictions on outside employment by aldermen.

During a committee meeting on the new round of ethics reforms, O’Shea responded to pushback from some of his colleagues with tough talk of his own.

“The feds are all around us. We need to send a message that this B.S. is over with,” O’Shea said. “We need to send the message to the people that we represent in our communities that the buck stops here and the bulls--- is going to stop.”

Lightfoot owes her landslide victory to the corruption scandal that culminated in the sweeping indictment of Ald. Edward Burke (14th).

Last summer, she persuaded aldermen to restrict their outside income and grant sweeping new investigative powers to City Hall Inspector General Joe Ferguson.

The language was tailor-made to prevent Burke from doing what he's done for decades and what got him in trouble with the feds: using his role as alderman and longtime Finance Committee chairman to hustle business for his private law firm, which specializes in property tax appeals.

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