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In 1965, a commission much like this one was charged with finding ways to eliminate conflicts of interests in Illinois government. The joint resolution that created this commission was sponsored by the late Adlai Stevenson III and the late Abner Mikva, both state reps at the time. I hope you find it inspiring to be called to continue their work.

We're here today to talk about the law that resulted from that group's work — the Illinois Governmental Ethics Act of 1967. There is a lot of unfinished business.

Last week, new Senate President Don Harmon made a big statement by giving up his outside job, recognizing that his new responsibilities would need his full-time attention. I'll note that still another ethics commission (in 2009) suggested making this a requirement for the House Speaker and Senate President — and paying them the same salaries as Supreme Court justices to make up for it. President Harmon might appreciate that idea.

For the rest of the General Assembly, though, this is supposedly a part-time job. I think we can agree that it often is not. Yet we don't pay our lawmakers enough to expect them to give up their other jobs in order to serve. I think we can also agree that the state benefits from having many professions represented in the legislature.

Still, we've had some painful reminders lately that lawmakers' outside jobs can be at odds with the interests of taxpayers. Such conflicts arise not just from jobs, but from relationships, investments, debts and other economic interests.

This is nothing new. That long-ago ethics commission concluded that Illinois needed safeguards to assure that public servants don't use their positions for private gain. But the law that eventually passed fell short of that goal.

The Conflicts of Interest Commission recommended a code of conduct as well as ethical principles for lawmakers and their close associates. Those things made it into

law, sort of. It also recommended penalties, including censure and public reporting, for violators. Those things did not.

The law says explicitly that the ethical principles “are intended only as guides, not as rules meant to be enforced by disciplinary action.”

So we ended up with a law that leaves it up to individual legislators to decide if they have a conflict of interest and if so, what to do about it. As a taxpayer, I say emphatically: That is not good enough.

Coupled with poor disclosure, these rules mean the public has no real way to tell if their representatives have conflicts — and no assurance that they’re dealing with them appropriately. This needs to change.

It’s easy enough to fix. Make those guidelines mandatory, and require lawmakers to disclose when they have a conflict of interest and abstain from voting. And add penalties for violations, as the original commission intended.

The Ethics Act also says “No person with a legislative interest should offer or confer an economic opportunity on a legislator with intent to influence that legislator’s official conduct, or to create good will on the part of the legislator.” (I don’t think I have to name names here, thanks to the U.S. Attorney.)

But again, this ethical principle is just a suggestion, not something to be enforced by penalties. And again, the solution is to make it mandatory and punish violators.

There are a few specific conflicts that need to be addressed directly in the law.

As we discussed at the previous hearing: Lawmakers should not be allowed to lobby other governments. Ex-lawmakers should have to wait two years before going to work as a lobbyist.

When we discussed lobbying at the previous hearing, there were questions about whether a lawmaker should be able to advocate to another government on behalf of a

constituent. That's not really about lobbying, it's about constituent service. And this is relevant in a discussion about conflicts of interest, because we want to be sure that constituent service is provided with no expectation from either party.

Jobs at Metra, scholarships to state universities, admissions to the U of I — these are all political favors that in the past were chalked up as “constituent service.” The General Assembly should adopt uniform rules for constituent casework, similar to those that apply to Congress.

How can the public judge whether elected officials have conflicts? Disclosure, disclosure, disclosure. In Illinois, though, that often consists of writing NONE, NONE, NONE on the statements of economic interest filed with the Secretary of State.

Even when the blanks are filled out, the level of detail required is only marginally useful. It's not especially helpful to know that someone earned more than \$5,000 last year working for a law firm, for example.

Some states require filers to report income within ranges, the most detailed being New York, which starts with 0-\$1,000 and continues: \$1,000-\$5,000, \$5,000-\$20,000, \$20,000-\$50,000, \$50,000-\$75,000, all the way up to \$10 million. Surely Illinois can find some meaningful middle ground here.

It's also possible to highlight potential conflicts of interest by reporting business or client categories or aggregating income within those categories. (For example: *Last year I made \$55,000 from three insurance clients.*) Ranges, aggregates and business categories provide a clearer picture of the filer's financial stakes while still allowing some privacy for their clients.

Some other requirements found elsewhere that are especially relevant to Illinois:

Some states require filers to report if their business interests have paid staff lobbyists. Illinois requires them to report any “close economic association,” with a lobbyist, which

is less helpful. (The Illinois form asks the lobbyist's name, employer, and the cause for which they lobby, but doesn't reveal where the lawmaker's interests might intersect.)

Other states require disclosure of financial interest in state-regulated industries such as gambling or utilities.

I understand that much of this will be a hard sell in the General Assembly, since this level of scrutiny is unheard of here. But the people of Illinois have paid a steep price for the state's casual attitude toward conflicts of interest. It's time to get serious.

I look forward to a day when the Illinois Governmental Ethics Act is cited as a model for other states. Please make it happen.