

ROLL CALL

October 27, 2005

Activists Target Lobbyists

By Tory Newmyer, Roll Call Staff

With a confluence of Washington, D.C., scandals reaching a fever pitch, several Congressional watchdog groups came together Wednesday to call for tighter rules restricting lobbyists and their interactions with government officials.

The Revolving Door Working Group - a coalition that includes Public Citizen, Common Cause and the Project on Government Oversight - released a report focused on slowing the revolving door between public and private sectors.

They called for strengthening conflict-of-interest rules for political appointees, doubling the one-year cooling-off period restricting lobbying by former officials and revoking special privileges for lawmakers-turned-lobbyists.

Many of the recommendations are already reflected in bills submitted this summer by Democratic Reps. Rahm Emanuel (Ill.) and Marty Meehan (Mass.), and in a similar Senate bill offered by Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.). Meehan and Feingold both attended Wednesday's news conference.

"I think we are rapidly approaching a tipping point where the public will become fed up with the status quo and demand reform," Feingold said at the event. "This report will add a lot to the effort to pass legislation to address the problem."

So far, the reform measures have won support from only Democrats. Senior Republican aides have pointed to that fact as evidence that the effort is politically motivated.

But some high-profile Republican reformers are likely to get involved soon. First among them could be Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), who worked with Feingold on campaign finance reform and who's said he would like to tackle an overhaul of lobbying rules once he wraps up his investigation into former super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

Indeed, as Feingold noted Wednesday, the two first began talking about teaming up over conversations about revolving door problems.

On the House side, Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.), who also earned his reformer's credentials by taking up campaign finance reform, has expressed interest.

"There is tremendous pressure on [Congress] to do something," said Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen. "Hopefully, they don't just do something, but do something

real.'

Craig Holman, the group's lobbyist, said the political ramifications of the reform issue are clouding debate as lawmakers look to 2006 midterm elections.

"It's a double-edged sword," he said. "On the one hand, it's holding their feet to the fire. In another way, it can become a partisan game for the elections."

Lobbyists have criticized the reform efforts to date as being unrealistic. They want a seat at the table where reform legislation is drawn up.

"If they're serious about this, and this isn't just political, they should work with us," said Paul Miller, president of the American League of Lobbyists. "A shot across the bow is not going to do it."

Meanwhile, some groups have called for stronger reforms than those currently being discussed.

"There is an opportunity to go further, if some emerging leader decided to go for it," said Mike Casey, director of Campaign for a Cleaner Congress.