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ON POLITICS IN THE GOLDEN STATE

Senate Democrats proposing revamp of campaign, gift laws



Calif. Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) leaves a press conference in Sacramento after answering questions about the criminal indictment of Sen. Ron Calderon (D-Montebello). Steinberg is proposing sweeping changes of the state's ethics and campaign laws. (Hector Amezcua / MCT / February 24, 2014)

By Patrick McGreevy

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SACRAMENTO -- Countering a series of scandals, including criminal charges against two of its members, state Senate Democrats plan Thursday to propose sweeping changes to the state Political Reform Act, including stricter limits on accepting gifts and campaign contributions.

The legislation will prohibit state lawmakers and their staffs from accepting many entertainment-related gifts, including spa treatments, golf games and tickets to plays, concerts and sporting events from special interests, Capitol sources said.

It will also cut the \$440 annual limit on gifts to state officials to \$200.

State candidates will have to report campaign spending and expenses on a quarterly basis, rather than semi-annually in non-election years, and will not be allowed to accept any gift from lobbyists or hold political fundraisers at the homes of lobbyists, a practice that spawned one recent scandal.

"These bills are some of the most significant reforms to ethics laws in 20 years," said Gary Winuk, enforcement chief for the Fair Political Practices Commission. That panel was originally set to meet on the reforms Thursday morning but the meeting was canceled after Gov. Jerry Brown's office raised objections.

"While the administration supports efforts to reform ethics laws, we expressed concerns that the FPPC was planning to vote on taking a formal position on legislation the public has not yet seen," said Jim Evans, a spokesman for the governor.

The proposals by the Senate Ethics Working Group come within days of Roderick Wright of Inglewood and Charles Calderon of Montebello taking leaves of absence so they can deal with criminal charges against them.

Wright was found guilty Jan. 28 of eight felonies involving perjury and voter fraud for lying about living in his district. Calderon was indicted Feb. 21 on two dozen federal charges that allege he accepted nearly \$100,000 in bribes to affect bills extending a film tax credit and changing workers' compensation rules.

Meanwhile, Sen. Tom Berryhill (R-Modesto) is fighting an administrative law judge's recommendation that he pay up to \$35,000 in fines for laundering campaign contributions to his brother's Assembly campaign, while 37 lawmakers and politicians recently were sent warning letters by the state Fair Political Practices Commission for receiving improper contributions from a lobbyist.

The improper contributions came in the form of expensive wine, liquor and cigars provided by lobbyist Kevin Sloat at fundraisers held at his home, something that would be outlawed by the proposed new laws.

Faced with the series of scandals, Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) formed the working group last month to revamp ethics and campaign finance laws that are decades old.