

'Pork' reform move gains support

Measure would address what critics of system call unfair distribution

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ALBANY -- Backing a bill recently put forth by several state lawmakers, representatives from political action committees and good-government groups announced their support for legislation that would reform and redistribute member item spending -- more popularly known as pork.

According to a report released by the Brennan Center for Justice, Citizens Union of the City of New York, Common Cause, the League of Women Voters and the New York Public Interest Research Group, the majority of Assembly and Senate districts in New York receive less than their "fair share" of the \$170 million awarded annually in member items.

In the current fiscal year, 114 of the 141 Assembly districts (81 percent) are below their \$300,000 member item average, and 43 of the 62 Senate districts (69 percent) are below their \$1.2 million average.

"We think the system is grotesquely unfair. ... The money flows to political power rather than to the needs of New Yorkers," said NYPIRG legislative director Blair Horner.

Member items are state funds delineated from the executive budget and doled out by legislators within their own districts. The theory behind the member item program is that each lawmaker knows the special needs of the district, and that legislators will award the funding to not-for-profit organizations and groups of vulnerable citizens, such as seniors in assisted living homes. The funding is supposed to benefit the public as a whole.

The report and the legislation come on the heels of years of scandals involving misuse of funds and conflicts of interest involving member item allocation.

According to Barb Bartoletti of the League of Women Voters, funds are sometimes awarded to entities that are controlled by someone in the family of the legislator handing out the member item money. In one notorious instance, former Assemblyman Brian McLaughlin collected \$95,000 from a Little League organization that was funded by his member item distribution. The Queens Democrat is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence.

"We have increasing scandals and increasing problems and the issue has yet to be dealt with," said Bartoletti.

Put forth by Sen. Jose Serrano, D-Bronx, and Assemblywoman Sandy Galef, D-Ossining, the bill calls for sweeping reforms of the member item program, including equal distribution of funds to all districts, clear prohibitions on conflicts of interest, and greater monitoring by state agencies.

According to Horner, the bill has sponsorship in the majority of both houses, although getting it through some of the state's top lawmakers may prove to be a major hurdle.

Many of the districts that receive the highest amount of member item funds are those represented by the most influential members of the Assembly and Senate. Senate President Malcolm Smith's 14th District in Queens was the top recipient of Senate member item funds with \$5,700,000 this fiscal year -- \$4,408,410 over the \$1.2 million average.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver's 64th District in Manhattan received \$2,631,500 in member item funds, the second-highest total for Assembly districts and \$2,328,134 over the \$300,000 average.

"I don't know how they can defend such an unfair system," Horner said.