

Andy's 'Hevesi Law' to \$lam crooked pols

By BRENDAN SCOTT and FREDRIC U. DICKER Post Correspondents

Last Updated: 11:23 AM, April 27, 2011

ALBANY -- Almost two weeks after disgraced ex-Comptroller Alan Hevesi was sent to the slammer for taking bribes, Gov. Cuomo yesterday unveiled a proposal to ban crooked politicians from drawing taxpayer-backed retirement checks.

The governor's bill -- dubbed "Hevesi's Law" among Capitol insiders -- would follow through on a campaign pledge to prohibit future elected officials and state employees from collecting a pension if they're found guilty of a felony for abusing their public posts.

"It is long past time that we learned the lessons of the Hevesi case and made permanent changes to our system that will stop the culture of corruption," Cuomo said.

The legislation seeks to correct one of the most widely criticized aspects of the wave of corruption cases that have rocked state government in recent years: That current law guarantees lavish retirement benefits for public officials like Hevesi even as they sit in prison.

The two-term Democratic state comptroller, 71, gets a state pension worth \$105,000 a year despite twice pleading guilty to felony corruption charges, most recently for accepting \$1 million in overseas travel and other benefits from an investor who got \$250 million in pension fund business.

"Officials who use their public positions to commit crimes should have no right to collect a public pension," Cuomo spokesman Josh Vlasto said. "It adds insult to injury when a public official commits a crime but still gets to reap the benefits of the office they abused."

The governor's bill -- even if the Legislature passed it today -- would come too late to affect the pension collected by Hevesi or other criminally charged pols such as Sen. Carl Kruger (D-Brooklyn) and former Senate Majority Leader Pedro Espada Jr. (D-Bronx).

It would only apply to officials who take office after its passage. That's because the state Constitution prohibits any cut in pension benefits for anyone who has paid even a dime into the system.

Nearly a dozen ex-lawmakers, including former Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno (R-Rensselaer) and former Brooklyn Democratic leader Clarence Norman, continue to get fat retirement checks thanks to that guarantee.

A Cuomo administration official said the governor would attempt to compensate for such pension protections by greatly increasing civil penalties for public integrity crimes and by strengthening prosecutors' powers to probe corruption.

At least 21 states have laws on the books stripping pensions from lawmakers convicted of felonies. Such measures have long languished in New York's Legislature, although support by Cuomo, state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli and several key lawmakers show their prospects of passing may be improving.

The governor also announced new permanent regulations banning placement agents, lobbyists and, for the first time, elected officials from participating in pension-fund business, relationships at the heart of the Hevesi case.

During the pension-fund investigation, it was revealed a handful of top pols, including Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan), helped arrange meetings between comptroller's officials and individuals seeking pension-fund investments.