

NEW HAVEN REGISTER OP ED: PENSION REVOCATION

By: Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz and State Senator Edward Meyer

In so many ways Connecticut is still paying the price of the John Rowland years; gridlock on our highways, stagnant job growth, and electricity rates that are among the highest in the nation. But there's another way in which taxpayers are paying off the Rowland years, and will be for decades to come.

The troika at the center of the Rowland corruption scandal, John Rowland, Peter Ellef and Larry Alibozek, are each eligible for hefty state pension pay-outs. Ellef, Rowland's former Chief of Staff, is collecting \$22,000 a year while he serves time at a federal prison. Alibozek, who was Rowland's Deputy Chief of Staff and is under house arrest for his corrupt activities, gets \$10,500 annually. And in a few years - when Rowland turns 55 - taxpayers will begin shelling out \$50,000 per year, plus medical benefits, to the former governor. To be sure, this is not a partisan issue. There are also Democrats, including former State Sen. Ernie Newton, who are collecting state benefits long after their conviction on corruption charges. The bottom line, a politician who violates the public trust can still be entitled to the public's treasure.

We believe this must stop, and on behalf of Connecticut taxpayers, we're fighting for a law that would revoke pension benefits of any state elected official or top appointee convicted of a crime related to their employment: this would include embezzlement, bribery, and fraud. Such a penalty would serve as a powerful deterrent to the people in power. It would also ensure that convicted politicians can't use their state pensions to pay-off court ordered fines and restitution, which is common practice now.

When the Rowland scandal reached its crescendo in 2004, lawmakers considered a proposal that would have banned public officials convicted of any crime involving corruption from receiving state pensions and benefits. Despite our support and lobbying, the bill died. One year later, as the last of the Rowland cronies were being sentenced, we fought for another bill that would strip corrupt politicians of taxpayer sponsored benefits. Again, lawmakers were reluctant to take a stand and the bill died without coming up for a full vote.

Although our General Assembly has failed to take action, other legislative bodies have. Thirteen states, including Massachusetts and Rhode Island, have enacted laws that revoke or reduce pension or other retirement benefits of public officials and top appointees who are convicted of a crime related to their employment. And just weeks ago the U.S. Senate and House each unanimously approved a measure whereby members of Congress convicted of serious crimes would lose their taxpayer-paid pensions, some amounting to more than \$100,000 a year. If Democratic and Republican members of Congress can agree on such a proposal, surely we can do the same in Connecticut.

There are some who may argue that revoking pension benefits for corrupt politicians is too severe and has the unintended consequence of hurting the person's family. Others fear repealing pension benefits could start us down a slippery slope: for example, would lawmakers eventually rescind the hard earned benefits of state employees who get caught in a speed trap on their way home from Hartford?

Of course, it's vital that the new law be clear and focused solely on elected officials and their top appointees. In addition, under one current proposal, the court would consider the severity of the crime, the amount of monetary loss suffered by the state, and the degree of public trust that was violated before anyone was stripped of their benefits.

In reality, the real danger is doing nothing. The Rowland scandal forced Connecticut's elected officials to make government more open, transparent, and accountable. Still, our work is not finished and as the wake of the Rowland scandal dissipates, it's crucial we stay vigilant. Our constituents demand it. In fact, we have heard from many who are shocked pension revocation isn't already law. It's time Gov. Rell and lawmakers finally get this done.

March, 2007