

Title: **What the new ethics laws will and won't do for our state**
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THE STATE

What the new ethics laws will and won't do for our state

SEN. WES HAYES had two requests for his colleagues on Wednesday: Be kind and courteous to the candidate who had defeated him in the Republican primary less than 24 hours earlier, and pass two ethics bills that would come up for a vote that night.

Ethics reform has no better friend at the State House than Mr. Hayes, yet he was one of three senators targeted for defeat last week by a governor who claimed ethics reform was one of her top priorities. So he made a point of saying he was not asking for a victory for the governor. "I'm not particularly concerned about that," the York County Republican said. "But I'm asking to do what's right. We need to pass ethics reform. If you want to do something for me, to send me out on a good note, just pass the ethics reform. It's the right thing to do."

Six hours later, the Senate voted unanimously to pass bills allowing an independent body to investigate legislators' compliance with the ethics law and requiring public officials to tell us where they get their income.

It was all testament to Sen. Hayes' integrity, the esteem in which his colleagues hold him and, unfortunately, how much ethics reform had been watered down over the four years it has

been claimed as a priority by Gov. Nikki Haley, many state senators and most House members.

Although they allow the State Ethics Commission to investigate legislators' compliance with the ethics law, the bills the Legislature passed on

Wednesday don't give those investigators any extra tools — or resources — to do so. Nor do they increase penalties in a way that would serve as a stronger deterrent against wrongdoing.

They don't improve our campaign-finance law. The flaws in that law are legion, but the biggest one involves what's called dark money: As long as individuals and organizations act independently of the candidates, they can spend unlimited amounts of money to influence our votes without telling us where they get the money or how they're spending it.

The Legislature never seriously considered requiring officials to report the *amount* of income they receive from non-governmental sources, even in broad ranges. We need this sort of information to help us recognize when public officials might put their personal interests ahead of the public interest, and knowing the sources of income goes a long way toward accomplishing that goal. But of course it would

be better to know the amount as well.

The House tried to make public officials report the amount of income they receive from lobbyists and businesses and organizations that hire lobbyists, but the Senate absolutely refused. (Some read a provision in current law as requiring officials to report some types of income from lobbyists and lobbyists' employers, but the law does not clearly require that.) One reform advocate worries that the intensity of opposition suggests there's a lot here that we need to know about the money some senators are receiving from the people in the business of influencing their vote. I suspect she's right about that.

But the claims that the bills are meaningless — which we heard from senators who fought to make sure they weren't any more meaningful — are not just hypocritical; they're absurd. In fact, the bills give voters two significant reasons to have more trust in our government.

Under current law, public officials have to report the money they receive from the government and, in limited cases, government contractors. Under H.3186, they will have to tell us the source, although not the amount, of nearly all of their

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income. (Private pensions, IRAs, disability payments and the like are excluded.) And unlike the law that currently requires very limited reporting, this doesn't use loophole-creating definitions: It smartly defines income as anything that has to be reported to the IRS.

Also under current law, legislators investigate complaints against fellow legislators, usually in secret, so we have no way of knowing whether they're enforcing the law or protecting their colleagues. Under H.3184, a reconstituted State Ethics Commission will investigate complaints against legislators. If it decides charges should be

brought, it releases all of its evidence to the public and to the House or Senate Ethics committee, which then decides whether the legislator violated the law and, if so, sets the punishment.

The Senate insisted on allowing the legislative committee to send the case back to the Ethics Commission for further investigation — a provision many see as an opportunity to bully the commission into backing down. But that doesn't look to me like a problem, since the public still gets to see all the evidence; if anything, it's a rope with which the committees could hang themselves.

Clearly, there is much more to

be done. But House leaders are determined to do more next year to address nearly all of these shortcomings, and a lot of senators are committed at least to shining some light on the dark money.

If we don't lose any more good legislators — and Senate Judiciary Chairman Larry Martin is the main one at risk — there is a chance that we will be able to use this year's long-awaited progress as a stepping stone to more.

At least I hope so.

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Children's Museum getting \$1M in SC funds

AMANDA COYNE

THE GREENVILLE NEWS

Legislators overrode Gov. Nikki Haley's veto of \$1 million in state funds for the Children's Museum of the Upstate last week, allowing the money to go to the museum for marketing and updates to disability accommodations.

State Rep. Phyllis Henderson, a Greer Republican, said that the funding for the museum showed equity in funding from the state budget, which often gives funds to other museums. Haley vetoed multiple budget lines for museums, but did not strike \$4 million in funding for the International African-American Museum in Charleston.

"Every year we see millions of dollars going to Charelston and the Lowcountry. I'm glad to finally see the Upstate getting some money from the budget," said Henderson, who is also a member of the Children's Museum of the Upstate board of directors.

With the \$1 million in state funding, the museum will change its front doors to a sliding model to be more accessible to people with physical disabilities. A lift will be added to the Bib's World outdoor exhibit, allowing

children in wheelchairs to access the second level play area. The museum will also advertise in magazines and use outdoor advertising to attract out-of-state visitors.

Nancy Halverson, the museum's president and CEO, said the state funds would allow the museum to continue making an economic impact on South Carolina and the Upstate.

"Being able to demonstrate that we are a driver of tourism and have had an economic impact of over \$75 million to South Carolina since opening our doors just six years ago, meant that from a business and economic development perspective, a continued investment in the future of the Children's Museum makes sense," Halverson said. "It's not often you can find that kind of return on the dollar and have a lasting impact on the lives of children. I'm humbled to say that these funds will allow us to do both."

The museum also received \$150,000 from the state in 2014. That was initially vetoed by Haley and was overridden.