House and Senate Republicans Deserve Support and Action

By State House Minority Leader Dan Short and State House Minority Whip Deborah Hudson

House and Senate Republicans recently unveiled a package of measures to reform the Delaware General Assembly.

The five bills, which will be filed following the legislature’s Easter Break, seek to do the following:

- This bill would lower the gift-reporting threshold of legislators to $50, making it consistent with the lobbyists’ gift-reporting mandate. (Currently, legislators are only required to report gifts valued over $100.)

- Prohibit any member of the General Assembly from being employed by the state after being elected to the legislature, eliminating a conflict-of-interest inherent in working for both the Executive and Legislative branches of government. The practice is already illegal in many states. However, the bill would not impact teachers and state employees who successfully win a legislative seat, since voters would have cast their ballots knowing the situation.

- Require all candidates appearing on the General Election ballot to disclose if they owe any income taxes, property taxes, or are delinquent on any child support obligations.

- Prohibit former General Assembly members from working as a lobbyist for a period of two years after the legislator’s term of office ends. The “cooling off” period is intended to curtail the influence such a lobbyist would have with his or her former colleagues. It would also reduce the potential for legislators to abuse their positions by cutting deals to trade legislative action for lobbyist jobs.

- Adopt uniform rules and protocols on public disclosure and the legislative process. The proposal is intended to reduce needless public confusion about potential differences in how the two chambers operate.

Some of these bills have been floated in the past, but the start of the new 147th General Assembly presents a fresh opportunity to pass legislation to improve the legislature’s accountability and transparency.

The State House of Representatives has nine freshmen, or 22 percent of its membership. The State Senate has an even larger percentage of rookies, with six of the 21 members new to the chamber. It needs to be noted that Senators Greg Lavelle
and Gerald Hocker were both long-serving state representatives before successfully making the jump to the upper house in 2012 and both are supportive of all five bills.

Unfortunately, within hours of their unveiling, at least one Democratic legislative leader was attempting to undermine the measures.

In one published report, Speaker of the House Pete Schwartzkopf accused Republicans of making a play for the political spotlight: “All of the sudden, they’re in the minority, and they know they can just rattle the cage and get attention but they don’t have to follow through with anything.”

In fact, House and Senate Republicans have sent the bills to all the General Assembly’s Democrats asking them to join us as partners and sponsors on these measures, providing them with the opportunity to claim equal authorship and credit. We believe government reform should be a non-partisan objective of all state legislators, not used as yet another issue of political division.

Why is it a bad idea to prohibit a state legislator from leveraging their public trust into a second state paycheck? Why is it a bad idea to discourage political deal making by requiring former legislators to wait before returning to Legislative Hall as influential lobbyists? Why is it a bad idea to require greater transparency by reducing the gift-reporting threshold for legislators? What is the case that can be made against any of these proposals or the others in the reform package? Thus far, the only response has been disappointing partisan rhetoric.

We constantly hear that the members of the Delaware General Assembly are better than our counterparts in Congress because of our ability to work together, bridge our political differences and do what’s best for our citizens. This will be a test of that refrain.

Democrats hold commanding majorities in both chambers of the General Assembly and the bills will go nowhere without some Democratic support. If the bills fail to advance, if we cannot unite to act on five reform bills that should have no partisan aspect, on what can we agree?