

Disclosure Bills Continue to be Blocked in Legislature

By State Rep. Ruth Briggs King

Two proposals seeking to make candidates and lawmakers more responsible for their actions have a long and unfortunate history of being killed in the General Assembly.

Currently pending action in the House Administration Committee, House Bill 137 would require that all candidates running in the general election disclose if they have unpaid state or federal personal income taxes or are in arrears on their local property taxes. In violation of House Rules, the bill has been held in the House Administration Committee since May 2.

The consideration of new or higher taxes is one of the most significant duties a lawmaker performs. The financial burden government places on citizens directly influences the welfare of every taxpayer.

The intent behind the bill is unmistakable. Candidates seeking offices where they will be making taxation decisions should be required to disclose if they have met their own tax-related obligations.

I am a co-sponsor of this proposal which, if enacted, would apply to all candidates equally. My initial expectation was that the bill would be embraced as a non-partisan reform that would help citizens make informed decisions. Disappointingly, that has not been the case. House Bill 137 has 15 sponsors in the General Assembly, only one of which is a member of the Democratic majority.

It is not the first time this bill has been blocked by House Democrats, who have full control over what proposals are released from committee and which come to the floor for action.

In fact, this is the fourth consecutive General Assembly where a version of this bill has been introduced. In the last legislative session, (House Bill 315) died pending action in the House Administration Committee. In the 148th General Assembly, House Bill 67 died after spending more than a year waiting to be placed on the House Agenda. The bill was also killed in the 147th General Assembly (HS 1 for HB 79) after spending a year waiting for consideration.

A second bill victimized through serial killing is a measure that seeks to help prevent elected officials from “double-dipping” salary from two taxpayer-funded jobs.

House Bill 126 would require elected officials or paid state, county, or local appointees – who are also employed by a government agency or school – to disclose such employment to the Public Integrity Commission (PIC). The disclosure would assist the

commission and the State Auditor to evaluate if the official was receiving dual compensation for overlapping hours of work.

I am the prime sponsor of this measure, which has been held without a hearing in the House Administration Committee since April 18. If enacted, it would fix a failing of our present system. Under current law, the Public Integrity Commission has no authority to have the State Auditor review the salary records of elected officials that may be getting paid simultaneously for two taxpayer-funded jobs.

Again, the bill would hold Delaware's elected officials (state, county, and local) more accountable and would apply equally to all public officeholders. You might believe such a measure would have broad bipartisan support. If so, you would be wrong.

Inexplicably, this bill has also been repetitively blocked by House Democrats, who have successfully killed it in each of the last two legislative sessions.

The proposal was introduced in 149th General Assembly as House Bill 73. It was released from committee after a year in limbo, then spent three more months futilely waiting to be placed on the House Agenda.

The incarnation of the bill introduced in the 148th General Assembly, House Bill 252, spent all of 2016 bottled-up in the House Administration Committee without a hearing.

I have yet to hear any rational objection as to why either transparency bill should not become law. I will again ask House Democratic leaders to bring these measures to the floor for debate and action.