

The Narragansett Times

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Give the RI Ethics Commission back its teeth

To the Editor,

Celona. Martineau. Fox. Carnevale.

The names of these, and other, disgraced former Rhode Island state lawmakers have become symbols of the greed and dishonesty that has too often plagued the General Assembly and dominated headlines.

Their misdeeds have tainted the State House and, at times, overshadowed the good and honest work done by the vast majority of legislators. Not only that, but their actions have also left a lasting impact on the public's perception of how our government works. The result is that our reputation is unfairly sullied for many of our residents, and for those who watch Rhode Island scandals from afar.

It's time that we say: Enough is enough. A fair government depends on the honest leadership of those we elect to

represent our interests. We must demand that the lawmakers working for us do so in an ethical manner – and we must hold them accountable if they stray from that mandate.

For too long, members of the General Assembly have remained immune from oversight from the state's independent Ethics Commission. A legal loophole took that power away back in 2009, leaving legislative activities totally unchecked. Remarkably, the Ethics Commission retained jurisdiction over every other public official, but not the ones responsible for some of the most embarrassing scandals in our state's history, the General Assembly.

It's time to restore the Ethics Commission's ability to investigate potential legislative conflicts of interest, and fine lawmakers if they run afoul of their ethical obligations. Forty-two states

already have this power. We need to give our Ethics Commission back its teeth.

This isn't a matter of restricting free speech or limiting our legislator's roles, as some claim. Rhode Island ACLU's position paper opposing Question 2 frantically warns of "potentially serious adverse effects," and other unknown dangers if passed. But nowhere does it cite real-life examples of injustice from when the Ethics Commission was in full force.

What we do know from research provided by Common Cause RI is that prior to 2009 when the Ethics Commission lost its oversight powers, there were 68 recusals by legislators per year because they had financial conflicts of interest. During a similar period after the 2009 decision, when left to monitor themselves, that number plummeted to 26. That's a 62 percent drop in the number of legislators who have financial conflicts

of interest, or the number of reported conflicts.

An empowered Ethics Commission is a matter of good government, of doing what's right and making sure our elected officials represent Rhode Islanders openly and honestly.

On Election Day this November 8, I urge you to join me, and the thousands of other Rhode Islanders supporting ethics reform, in voting Yes on Question 2. Let's restore faith in our government by sending the clear message that we will no longer tolerate unethical behavior at the State House.

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