REFORM EFFORTS FARE BADLY IN LEGISLATURE THIS YEAR AS ANOTHER BILL BITES THE DUST REFORM BILLS GO NOWHERE THIS SESSION

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The Legislature has yet to give final approval to any major ethics reform bill with just seven days left in the 45-day annual session. Monday, House members sliced the heart from a recall-election proposal before passing it on a 58-13 vote and sending it to the Senate. "This would effectively gut the bill entirely," sponsoring Rep. Russell Cannon, R-Sandy, complained before representatives resoundingly approved the second of two diluting amendments. It was the latest in a series of legislative rejections of proposed overhauls. Most lawmakers say they oppose tampering with a system that already serves Utahns well. But watchdog groups view most legislators' resistance to reform as a symptom of denial in the face of lagging public confidence. Recent polls in The Salt Lake Tribune and Deseret News show widespread distrust of the Legislature.

So far, lawmakers have:

-- Slammed the door shut on the secret Rules Committee, which screens bills, after opening it to the public for a single five-minute meeting. The issue will be studied for a year.

-- Subjected a campaign-finance reform measure aimed at limiting special-interest contributions to a yearlong study.

-- Diluted and then killed a proposal to prohibit legislators and other public officials from becoming special-interest lobbyists for two years after leaving office.

-- Defanged the recall-election bill.

"At this point, it's been heavily an anti-reform session," lamented Common Cause of Utah spokeswoman Cassie Dippo. "I'd rate it as terrible. I wouldn't even use the word reform," said Jeff Volimas, Utah leader of Ross Perot's United We Stand America. Still, at least two major reform proposals remain alive, with a chance of passing.

One bill -- already approved by the House -- would require lobbyists to report virtually all spending on lawmakers. It also would bar legislators from accepting gifts worth more than $50.

A second bill would impose 12-year term limits on lawmakers and statewide officeholders, including the governor and attorney general.

Both measures have support in high places. House Speaker Rob Bishop, R-Brigham City, is the sponsor of the term-limits bill, which is expected to be debated today in the House.
Logan Republican Lyle Hillyard is Senate sponsor of the lobby-disclosure bill, which leading senators have promised to put on the floor for discussion. But there are changes lying in wait for both bills. Senate Majority Leader Lane Beattie has prepared an amendment that would require anyone using information from the lobbyist spending reports to publish a disclaimer. The mandatory warning label would say the information "may reflect the bias of the author" or be used for "political purposes." Legislative attorneys have raised concerns the plan would violate free-speech guarantees. But Beattie, a critic of media reporting on the Legislature, believes the amendment raises a legitimate issue. "People ought to be aware that there are groups, special interests and some reporters, that may use that {information} with some ulterior motives," Beattie said. He said he has not yet decided whether to push the amendment.

Hillyard, sponsor of the lobby-disclosure bill, said he is preparing his own amendments. Instead of the bill's current requirements that virtually every penny of lobbyist spending on lawmakers be reported, he would phase in the disclosure over two years.

Bishop, sponsor of the term-limits bill, believes his measure will be approved. He comes to the debate armed with endorsements from Utah's top Republicans -- Gov. Mike Leavitt, Sens. Orrin Hatch and Bob Bennett and Rep. Jim Hansen.

But Bishop said he knows of at least one amendment being considered -- exempting legislators from the bill.

In other legislative action Monday:

-- The state Emergency Work Program -- lauded as an example of progressive welfare reform and the subject of a visit by British dignitaries last year -- barely survived the budget hatchet. In some last-minute finagling, the Human Services Appropriation Subcommittee voted not to slash the $1.7 million needed for the "workfare" program. The committee also kept $2.5 million in its budget for health-care reform, reversing plans to force the Executive Appropriations Committee to fund that some other way.

-- Rep. Bill Orton, D-Utah, urged lawmakers not to cut taxes in spite of a surplus in the state budget. Speaking as "a private citizen and a taxpayer," Orton told senators he would prefer to have the extra money spent on education.

-- The Senate passed a bill allocating $300,000 next year for matching grants so cities and counties can make recreation facilities more accessible to the handicapped. The bill now goes to the House.

-- House members unanimously approved a measure that would eliminate the current law requiring segregation of prison inmates testing positive for AIDS.

-- Representatives passed 71-0 a bill that would shorten the deadline for prosecution of government officials or employees on charges of misuse of public monies. Currently the
crime -- like that of murder -- is under no statute of limitations. The bill proposes a four-year limitation.

-- Senators gave initial approval to eliminating a $480,000-per-year sales-tax exemption on limousine and taxi fares. The loophole is one identified for closure by the governor under a plan to free up more money for public schools without raising taxes.

-- Senators approved a bill to lower the legal standard of proof that public officials must meet to keep government records from the public. The measure, sponsored by Sen. David Steele, R-West Point, also makes it harder to recover attorney costs when suing state agencies for access to those records.

-- House members approved and sent to the Senate an "anti-stalking" measure that would prohibit release of personal information on motor-vehicle records. A person's traffic record still would be public. But addresses, phone numbers and Social Security numbers would be confidential.

-- State permits to carry concealed weapons would be kept secret under a bill approved 62-4 in the House. Rep. Blake Chard, R-Layton, said the change is needed so concealed-weapons license-holders "won't be listed in their local newspapers."

Salt Lake Tribune reporter Tony Semerad contributed to this story.