

2005: A Year of Reform

The 2005 legislative session represents an incredible success for those of us who care about ethics and accountability in government. After years of feeling sidelined by the very public officials who are supposed to serve them, New Yorkers have won key victories in the fight for a more open and honest state government. Here are a few highlights from the year:

- **Restrictions on Covert Lobbying by Those Seeking State Contracts:** Previously, lobbying by those seeking state contracts had been undisclosed and unregulated. This year, lawmakers agreed to require disclosure of efforts to influence government contracting decisions and to restrict bidders' access to decision makers during the procurement process, thus limiting the role of lobbyists.
- **Closure of the Notorious "Get out of Jail Free" Ethics Loophole:** Lawmakers agreed that officials who violate ethics laws will no longer escape oversight and prosecution by ethics watchdogs simply by leaving government. Previously, leaving a government post allowed an elected official to dodge prosecution for any ethical infractions committed on the job.
- **Computerization of Local Campaign Finance Data:** Candidates and political parties at the local level will now be required to electronically file campaign finance information with the State Board of Elections, which will in turn post this data on the internet. This will allow voters to see who is giving contributions to their local elected officials and will help the Board of Elections enforce contribution limits that were previously frequently violated on the local level.
- **Improvements to the Freedom of Information Law:** This year's changes will make it easier for citizens to challenge agencies that ignore FOIL requests for information.
- **Improvements to the State's Budget Process:** The Governor's budget proposals will be more open to public scrutiny, an independent budget office will be created, and a measure will go before voters in November that will let them decide whether or not the legislature can draft its own budget once negotiations with the Governor reach a stalemate.
- **Changes to the Rules That Govern the Legislature:** Both houses of the legislature attempted to improve the rules under which they conduct the people's business. To a modest extent, the Assembly's changes improved the way that house operated. The Senate's changes arguably made the situation in that house worse.
- **Televised Coverage of Legislative Proceedings:** Lawmakers agreed to create a "C-SPAN" for New York. Next year, New Yorkers will be able to tune in for unedited, gavel-to-gavel coverage of legislative votes and limited exposure of other events. However, more comprehensive coverage (such as that currently seen on the federal C-SPAN) is not yet ready for prime time.
- **Reigning in of New York's Out of Control Public Authorities:** Lawmakers agreed to modest oversight of public authorities. In addition to changes in the internal governance of the authorities, the plan calls for the creation of an Inspector General and a new budget office to monitor the workings of these scandal plagued entities. However, these monitors will work under the control of the Governor and will not be the truly independent monitors for whom good government groups had advocated.

These reform victories were the product of years of concerted effort on the part of good government groups like Common Cause/NY and building frustration and activism on the part of citizens and voters. There is still much more to be done both to monitor implementation of the new laws and regulations we won this year and to create a truly open and ethical New York State government. The changes we have witnessed this year have certainly been broad, but there are a number of deeper, more fundamental reforms yet to win.