

## Legislature approves bill requiring disclosure of government contracts

Politicians who make money off government contracts will have to disclose the work under a bill that got final approval in the Legislature Sunday.

BY JAY ROOT    MAY 28, 2017    9 PM



Freshman Giovanni Capriglione, R-Southlake, talks to colleagues in the House chamber on March 4, 2013. Capriglione received criticism in committee for proposing a bill that would increase transparency in members' business dealings.

📷 Bob Daemmrich

Elected officials and high-ranking state officials in Texas will soon have to disclose their business relationships with governmental entities.

The new requirement, part of Gov. [Greg Abbott's](#) ethics reform package, was given final approval by the Legislature Sunday. [HB 501](#) won't take effect for another 18 months, but when it does, state officials who do significant business with cities, counties and other governmental entities will have to disclose the contracts on personal financial statements filed with the Texas Ethics Commission.

Over the years, state politicians doing governmental work have sparked controversy and raised questions about whether they're using their political influence to cash in or voting on legislative measures that could affect their bottom line. Among the relationships that stirred criticism in the past: Attorney General [Ken Paxton's](#) investment in a company that sells police video recording technology to law enforcement agencies; Sen. [Royce West's](#) work for Dallas County and Dallas schools; and former Sen. [Wendy Davis' legal work](#) for the North Texas Tollway Authority, the DFW Airport board and other entities. (All have said their contracts presented no conflict of interest.)

The author of the new disclosure legislation in the Texas House, state Rep. [Giovanni Capriglione](#), said the bill represented "a humongous leap forward" in government transparency.

"People who file under this are going to have to list more of their interests than they've ever had to file before," Capriglione said. "You'll be able to dig down and find out which elected officials have government contracts and if that is at all in conflict with the way they're voting."

The bill requires elected officials and bureaucrats who file state personal financial statements to report their interest in government contracts valued at \$10,000 or more during a calendar year; it also requires legislators who serve as bond lawyers for public entities to list that work on their reports.

Compared to earlier versions, the bill was weakened in two significant respects. It removed a provision that would have required officials to reveal business referral arrangements, including lawyer referrals, on their financial disclosures. It also gives what ethics reform proponents call a "get-out-of-jail-free card," namely a new provision that allows officials to correct errors or omissions in their reports without fine or sanction as long as the official declares the mistake was made with no intent to mislead and fixes it within two weeks of discovering it.

Craig McDonald, director of the watchdog group Texans for Public Justice, said [HB 501](#) was a "step forward" even as he lamented the inclusion of language that softens already weak enforcement of ethics violations.

"There's no doubt that the legislators want to do everything they can to get off the hook when they make errors or try to hide their disclosures," he said.

The House and Senate gave final approve to the bill Sunday. Abbott has until mid-June to sign or veto the measure.