



Sampson playing a law-firm Shel game

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ALBANY -- Move over, Sheldon Silver!

Senate boss John Sampson has borrowed a page from the powerful Assembly speaker and become the second big-time Democrat to join a law firm with ties to the state's powerful trial-lawyers lobby, The Post has learned.

Sampson, the state Senate Democratic leader, quietly accepted a job last month as "counsel" to Belluck & Fox, a politically connected Manhattan law firm that specializes in asbestos litigation and that claims to have won \$220 million in judgments.

The new gig, which comes just six months after Senate Democrats elected Sampson to run the legislative chamber, bears striking similarity to the oft-criticized side job held by Silver (D-Manhattan).

Like Silver, Sampson won't say how much his job pays. And, as is the case with Silver's firm, Weitz & Luxenberg, a founding partner of Sampson's firm, Joseph W. Belluck, sits on the board of the state Trial Lawyers Association.

The potent advocacy group spends about \$2 million a year on campaign contributions and lobbying expenses. Silver has repeatedly come under fire for aiding its decades-long winning streak in the Assembly.

The group's new ties to the Senate leader are sure to draw similar concern, especially from those who back reforming the state's medical-malpractice laws.

"The trial lawyers are now covered in both houses," one veteran Capitol lobbyist said. "They have Shelly in one prominent firm, and they have the Senate leader in another firm that has a seat on their board of directors."

"You can't do any better than that that."

Sampson controls day-to-day decisions in the Senate in addition to leading its Judiciary and Ethics committees. The "part-time" Brooklyn lawmaker earns \$88,500 annually, including a \$9,000 leadership stipend.

Sampson spokesman Austin Shafran refused to disclose the senator's outside income, but insisted the job would not compromise his official duties.

"Senator Sampson's outside work has never been and never will be in conflict with his official duties," Shafran said.

The career move comes as Democratic lawmakers negotiate ethics-reform legislation in response to several recent embarrassments, including the corruption conviction of former Republican Senate leader Joseph Bruno.

During Bruno's trial, an Albany businessman testified that he started paying Bruno consulting fees after the senator complained about the money Silver was getting "from the trial lawyers." Bruno denied the remark.

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