

NEW YORK POST

Cuomo whips up plan to make corrupt pols pay

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ALBANY — Feeling the heat of federal probes targeting corrupt politicians in Albany, Gov. Cuomo rushed out a quick-fix proposal for the state Legislature yesterday, in a move to rein in rogue lawmakers.

Flanked by district attorneys from the city and two suburban counties, Cuomo unveiled a legislative package including a bill that would make it a crime for any government employee to fail to report attempted bribery.

Cuomo's "Public Trust Act" would raise penalties for breaking existing laws and would make it easier for district attorneys to bring government corruption cases that have often fallen to federal prosecutors.

The act would create specific crimes of bribing a public official and scheming to corrupt the government, in addition to the misdemeanor offense of failing to report corruption.

"When it comes to public integrity, you can't have enough cops on the beat," Cuomo said. "If you are a public official and you break the law, you will be caught, you will be prosecuted and you will go to jail."

At a Manhattan news conference, Cuomo proposed matching state law with the federal statutes that Manhattan US Attorney Preet Bharara used to lodge bribery charges against Sen. Malcolm Smith (D-Queens) and Assemblyman Eric Stevenson (D-Bronx).

The Stevenson case also involved the resignation of Assemblyman Nelson Castro (D-Bronx), who wore a wire for more than three years while in office to help deliver the goods on his colleague.

The federal cases prompted Bharara last week to say that “political corruption in New York is indeed rampant,” undermining the governor’s claims that Albany was shaking off its old dysfunction.

Critics called the hastily drawn-up bill a knee-jerk reaction to renewed scrutiny of corruption at the state Capitol.

“Clearly, it’s not by coincidence that this is coming out the week after we had three new scandals,” New York League of Women Voters legislative director Barbara Bartoletti said of Cuomo’s proposal.

“This is much too quick a reaction to pressure from recent scandals,” added Terry Kindlon, an Albany criminal-defense lawyer. “This is a huge proposal with hundreds of moving parts that makes profound, sweeping changes [that] should not be undertaken lightly.”

Kindlon compared the proposal to the gun-control bill Cuomo and lawmakers jammed through in January on the heels of December’s Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Newtown, Conn.

“This might be a good time to take a step back from governing by emergency, which we seem to be doing a lot of lately, and to brainstorm all the ramifications of such sweeping changes,” Kindlon said.

But Cuomo said that now — with the public’s attention focused on corruption — is the time to act.

“I want to strike while the iron is hot,” he said. “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”

Cuomo said he hoped lawmakers would adopt anti-corruption measures before the 2013 legislative session ends in June.

Assemblyman Joseph Lentol, (D-Brooklyn) said he and his colleagues will need the time.

He said any proposals should go through the legislative committee and public-hearing process — unlike the gun-control bill.

Stevenson was arrested for allegedly taking bribes in exchange for trying to help operators of an adult-day-care center block competitors.

Smith, along with City Councilman Dan Halloran (R-Queens), allegedly conspired with city Republican county chairs to buy Smith's way onto the GOP line in this year's mayoral race.

"The public expects elected officials to conduct their business ethically, honestly, and it's time our laws caught up with reality," said Manhattan DA Cyrus Vance Jr.

Cuomo's proposal would also provide a way for witnesses to receive only partial immunity when testifying before a grand jury, as in federal cases, so that a witness isn't free from being prosecuted by a local district attorney.

He would bar people convicted of public corruption from holding elected or civil office and prohibit them from lobbying, contracting, receiving state funding or doing business with the state directly or indirectly.

Cuomo called his proposals "step one" and said he'll also pursue campaign-finance reforms, tougher enforcement by boards of elections and additional ethics reforms.

Legislative leaders were noncommittal, but said they'd work with Cuomo.

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