

Many in top state posts fail to file ethics form

'05 LAW | Watchdog says 66 skip contracts disclosure

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BY LEONARD N. FLEMING, Staff Reporter – *Chicago Sun-Times*

Four years ago, Gov. Blagojevich touted a get-tough ethics law to root out corruption.

Yet records show dozens of officials and appointees -- some of them in high-level jobs -- have failed to live up to that standard.

The Better Government Association says 66 people appointed to state boards, commissions, authorities and task forces have failed to file a required state contracts disclosure form with the secretary of state's office. Failure to file the form makes it harder to spot conflicts of interest, the group says.



Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich signs into law an ethics reform package Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2003, in Chicago. Looking on from left are; Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, State Comptroller Dan Hynes, State Sen. Kirk Dillard, State Sen. Susan Garrett, State Sen. Debbie Halvorson, States Attorney Gen. Lisa Madigan, Secretary of State Jesse White, State Rep. John Fritchey and former State Comptroller Dawn Clark Netsch.
(AP file)

One person who didn't file is Niranjan S. Shah, the principal owner of Globetrotters Engineering Corp. He was appointed by the governor to serve on the Illinois State Police Merit Board in 2006, and his company has many state contracts.

BGA officials say others -- such as Deputy Gov. Sheila Nix, Chief Operating Officer John Filan, Aging Department director Charles D. Johnson and Human Services secretary Carol L. Adams -- also have not filed forms. Other high-profile names are CTA Board chairwoman Carole L. Brown and Illinois Community College Board president Geoffrey S. Obrzut.

"To me, the primary fault lies with these individuals for not filing and the Blagojevich administration for not making it clear to these individuals that they need to file," said Jay Stewart, executive director of the BGA. "To me, it's irrelevant if there's a conflict or not. Even if there is no conflict, you're supposed to file."

The ethics law, which took effect June 10, 2005, requires that anyone appointed to a board or commission created by state law must file a disclosure of all contracts that the person or a relative has with the state.

But attorneys for Secretary of State Jesse White's office say their reading of the law states that the only people required to file the form are appointees with contracts, and that others can file at their own behest -- a interpretation the BGA rejects.

Rebecca Rausch, a Blagojevich spokeswoman, said Cabinet officials such as Johnson, Adams and Nix, as well as others like Obrzut, did not have to file because they are ex-officio, or placed there by virtue of one's office or position. Nix, she said, is no longer serving on the Illinois Workforce Investment Board.

Rausch said that the contracts disclosure form is given to every appointee, but that the secretary of state's office should do a better job of notifying the administration when people fail to file, similar to when appointees don't file a statement of economic interests.

"We take this law seriously," Rausch said. "I think it's important to know that the vast majority of our appointees have turned in their paperwork. Some have not, and we're making sure they do."

Filan said that because he serves on an advisory committee, he is not subject to file. Johnson and Nix did not return calls seeking comment. Adams said she believed all proper forms were filed but would check, and Obrzut said he would file if it was required.

Shah, whose company is an architecture and engineering services firm based in Chicago, said he would file the form in short order. His company has made \$14.8 million in state contracts since 2003, records show.

"Unfortunately, I first learned of the existence of this form from the Chicago Sun-Times. I have never seen this form," he said via e-mail through a spokesman. "Full disclosure of my interest in state contracts is absolutely in the public interest."

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