

Lobbying and Ethics Reform are necessary in the future -- March 2006

By: Congressman Mike Castle

It is hard to ignore that one of the key debates taking shape in Congress right now is how to reform lobbying practices and improve ethics surrounding Congress. In an effort to enact real reform and move the Congress in the right direction, I introduced my own legislation; The Accountability and Transparency in Ethics Act, which I believe will complement many of the bills already on the table and fill gaps in certain areas. The Republicans recently proposed their lobbying and ethics reform package, which I believe is a positive step in the right direction but does not go far enough in prompting the Ethics Committee to function properly.

My legislation stems from my frustration with the House Committee on Standards, commonly known as the House Ethics Committee. For the past fifteen months, this Committee, whose constitutional responsibility it is to "police" members of Congressional behavior, relationships with lobbyists and ethical concerns and punish where necessary, has not functioned properly and ignored blatant discrepancies. Instead, it has fallen prey to partisan bickering, frankly leaving all ethical matters behind.

The cornerstone of my legislation is the creation of an outside independent commission. This commission would be able to investigate, with subpoena power, and alleged violation of any law or regulation by a Member, Delegate, officer or Staff of the House of Representatives. It would report findings and recommend disciplinary action to the House Committee on Standards and report any evidence of violation to the appropriate state or federal authorities. My goal is to remove the partisanship from the House Ethics Committee by placing investigations powers elsewhere. Disclosure and transparency are the keys to keeping everyone above board and an outside independent commission is the way to make this happen.

My legislation would also establish mandatory ethics training of Members, staff and lobbyists. It would hold lobbyists liable for knowingly violating the gift ban, ensure all disclosure files are publicly accessible and would extend the period of time that former Members or staff must wait to lobby.

The time for reform is now. We have an opportunity to enact real reform in the wake of the many scandals surrounding Congress and I have pledged to fight for the most comprehensive package. The issue of ethics is too important not to act.