

Senator José Serrano
29th Senate District
406 Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York 12248
(518) 455-2795



Assemblywoman Sandy Galef
95th Assembly District
641 Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York 12248
(518) 455-5348

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Contact:
Sandy Galef (518) 455-5348
Greg Meyer (Serrano) (212)828-5829

Galef/Serrano Call for Revamp of Member Item System in Light of Persistent Abuse

Legislators introduce bill with stronger controls to prevent abuse of this system

Assemblywoman Sandy Galef and Senator Jose M. Serrano are calling for a complete overhaul of the member item system, money that is given to members of the New York State legislature through the state budget for local community organizations. Historically these funds have had very little oversight and no formal vetting process, which has made it easy for some members to abuse them. Assemblywoman Galef and Senator Serrano would like to change this system.

While new member items have not been included in the New York State budget for the last few years, there may come a time when they are included in the budget again. In order to prepare for that scenario, Assemblywoman Galef and Senator Serrano are urging their colleagues to pass their legislation, A641/S920, which would set very specific rules on this money before it is distributed.

“I have seen multiple colleagues over the years face legal trouble when they were caught using member items for illegal purposes, often to line their own pockets,” said Galef. “While the majority of our colleagues used their member item money for worthy causes, historically there are always a few who give substantial state money to personal projects for their own benefit, and it has cast a negative light on the entire legislature.”

“New Yorkers have called for government reform in many different areas, and this bill provides a common sense approach to this issue by adding layers of scrutiny and transparency to a process that has traditionally been shrouded in mystery,” said Serrano.

“Member items have been plagued by unequal distribution among members, inadequate vetting, used by legislative leaders to reward loyalty and punish dissent, and by corrupt legislators to fund their interests. We can’t let these reasons however spoil what had been important funding streams for worthwhile community organizations and nonprofits which is why Citizens Union supports the reforms in the Serrano – Galef bill. Their reforms strengthen oversight, remove the funding inequity, and ensure that the groups that need vital funds receive them,” said Dick Dadey, Executive Director for Citizens Union.

Assemblywoman Galef’s and Senator Serrano’s legislation, which has bi-partisan support, would promote fairness and transparency by including a vetting process to guarantee member items are used for legitimate purposes. The bill states that member items will not be distributed when a conflict of interest exists between the legislator designating the member item and the potential recipient. This legislation would require each legislator to sign a conflict of interest form under perjury of law, therefore increasing the individual legislator’s liability when distributing member items.

In addition, this bill would require that state agencies evaluate the spending by the legislator’s recipient to ensure the money is being used for its intended purpose, and recipients receiving member items of at least \$50,000 would have to file a report with the New York State Attorney

General detailing how the state money was used. These additional steps in the distribution of member items will help prevent member item money from being used fraudulently, and ensure that the money was used appropriately for its intended purpose.

Lastly, this legislation would codify that each member of the state senate and assembly receive the same allocation as the other members in their respective house. Every legislator represents the same number of people as other members in their legislative houses, and there is no reason that one district should receive more of these tax dollars than other districts.

“In the event member item funds are restored in future budgets, the provisions in this bill will ensure funds are being used for legitimate purposes and lead to public confidence in how community grants are distributed,” concluded Serrano.

“Member items are paid for with taxpayer money, and when we are given the opportunity to use this money to support local programs, we must be held accountable to the people of New York. The current system has been fraught with scandals and the legislation we have introduced would create integrity in the member item process and fix what has long been a broken system,” concluded Galef.

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