

LOCAL & STATE

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IN MY OPINION
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Ethics stops at door of Legislature

The Florida Legislature hasn't been so enthused about ethical niceties. Until now.

Senate Bill 1180 would finally get tough on "soliciting, or demanding money, gifts, or donations." The bill mandates honest disclosure of personal finances.

SB 1180 provides much of what political reformers have sought. Except the strictures don't apply to politicians. Just roadside beggars.

Our ethically challenged Legislature has fashioned a code of ethics for panhandlers.

Florida lawmakers may be reluctant to police their own behavior when it comes to money, gifts, donations and such, but pathetic souls pleading for help at urban intersections better damn well be honest. Or face the legal consequences.

The restrictions, folded into a pages-long transportation bill, would put an end to beggars claiming that they need money "when solicitor already has sufficient funds to meet that need and does not disclose that fact." If this bill becomes law (which seems probable), panhandling becomes a means-tested pursuit.

The usual ruses of the trade would be outlawed. Beggars can no longer claim they're "from out of town and stranded," unless they're actually from out of town and stranded. That's hard to imagine, given that under the bill, local governments "shall adopt a permitting process" for panhandling. ("The permit holder must keep the permit on his or her person at all times.") A laminated begging permit dangling from a "stranded" motorists neck, would tend to diminish the credibility of: "Excuse me but my car just broke down."

Nor can beggars don Army surplus fatigues and pretend to be the down-and-out vets "when the solicitor is not a present or former member of the service indicated."

Teary women can't stuff pillows under their shirts and feign pregnancy. Beggars can't sit in a wheelchair and fake an impairment.

Yet, only a few additional phrases could extend the crackdown on unethical panhandling to a crackdown on unethical politicking.

SB 1180 defines one form of panhandling: To "offer an individual an item of little or no monetary value in exchange for

LEGISLATURE | LOBBYISTS

Ban on gifts may be eased

Lawmakers are set to pass a bill that would allow them to again receive small gifts from lobbyists.

BY STEVE BOUSQUET
Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — An effort to legalize lobbyist gift-giving surprisingly cleared its first hurdle Monday despite warnings by opponents that it won't look good back home in a year of \$4 billion in budget cuts.

The Senate Rules Subcommittee on Ethics and Elections voted 7-4 to advance the bill pushed by Sen. Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, but prospects for passage are shaky because Senate President Mike Haridopolos, a U.S. Senate candidate, is strongly opposed to the idea, and lack of time may prevent a floor vote.

Jones, the longest-serving member of the Legislature, blast-

ed the 2006 gift ban that prohibits a lawmaker from accepting a free cup of coffee from a lobbyist while allowing lawmakers to solicit checks as large as \$25,000 from special interests to political committees, saying it has had a chilling effect on all forms of socializing.

His bill, SB 1322, would allow lobbyists to provide \$25 worth of food and drink or gifts to lawmakers. Items worth more than \$25 up to \$100 would have to be reported, and anything over \$100 would require approval of the Senate president or House speaker.

"What I see happening in this process in the past five years is a disservice to this state," Jones said. "This is turning into a leadership-run organization and it shouldn't be that way."

Senators were sharply divided

• TURN TO GIFTS, 2B

Bill gives 'dangerous' dogs another chance

Some lawmakers are making a push for dogs seized in fighting-ring busts to get a better shot at being adopted.

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI
Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Sen. Jim Norman, the Tampa Republican who drew fire from animal-rights groups earlier in the lawmaking session, took part in a markedly different event Monday, this time siding with the activists.

Norman is sponsoring a bill that would no longer immediately classify fighting dogs as dangerous. And he engaged in some show-and-tell at a news conference Monday to prove his legisla-

tive point.

"This is a dog that has been typified as a vicious type animal," Norman said as he displayed Dolly the pit bull on the floor of the rotunda between the Florida House and Senate. The friendly pooch posed for photos and occasionally gave Rep. Luis Garcia a playful lick in the face.

Animal-rights advocates pounced on Norman when he filed a bill that would have made it

• TURN TO DOGS, 2B

MISSION OF MERCY



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Drs. Richard Lee and Eduardo Alfonso of the University of Miami's Bascom Palmer Eye Institute watch at Miami International Airport Monday as the institute's Vision Van is loaded onto a plane bound for Sendai, Japan. Bascom Palmer and Keio University School of Medicine are teaming up on a Japan Eye Rescue Mission in the region ravaged by the quake and tsunami.

FORT LAUDERDALE

Suit: Rogue cops framed



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Raul Martinez to seek his old job: mayor