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Leaders finally back ethics

It took far too long — seven years. And even as it became clear that this was the year that state lawmakers would probably pass some sort of ethics bill, it looked as if the language was going to be watered down, with an eye to protecting incumbents.

Instead, House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello and Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed did the right thing this week, supporting bills that can finally give voters a chance to restore Ethics Commission jurisdiction over the General Assembly and close a gaping loophole in the enforcement of the state's ethics laws.

This is great news for Rhode Island. Few issues have generated so much interest in recent years as the lack of ethics oversight over state lawmakers. And how could it be otherwise? Rhode Islanders voted in 1986 to amend the state Constitution and create an Ethics Commission that has the authority to investigate conflicts of interest involving elected officials and public employees — state and local. The commission lost that authority over lawmakers when the state Supreme Court questioned, in 2009, whether that power conflicted with another provision in the state Constitution.



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D-Scituate. But each time, House and Senate leaders refused to get on board.

In the meantime, a wave of scandals only reinforced the reality that scrutiny by the Ethics Commission is sorely needed. While no guarantee of good government — competitive elections are still the best ethics reform of all — ethics oversight of state lawmakers puts our representatives on notice that there could be consequences to bad behavior and brazen conflicts of interest. That encourages them to recuse themselves in cases where there may be conflicts. Restoring this power also would send a welcome message that Rhode Island wants to turn the page on its legacy of political corruption.

In ruling this way, the court made it clear that the matter could be clarified simply by putting the question back to the voters. A number of lawmakers attempted to do so over the years, including the late Sen. J. Michael Lenihan, D-East Greenwich, as well as Sen. Edward O'Neill, R-Lincoln, and Rep. Michael Marcello,

The matching bills backed by the House speaker and Senate president are not the end-all. They merely give voters their long-awaited chance to clarify the issue. Should the bills win final passage, as expected, Rhode Islanders will need to do their part in November and vote for restoration of the Ethics Commission authority they approved three decades before.

If you would like to thank these legislative leaders for supporting clean ethics bills, Speaker Mattiello's office can be reached at (401) 222-2466; and Senate President Paiva Weed's at (401) 222-6655.