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Legislators pull back from formal ethics proposals, while Huntsman decides to move forward

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The ethics reform effort in the Utah Legislature goes forward, GOP leaders say, even though both the House and Senate Republican caucuses failed to formally adopt a specific reform plan this past week.

Instead, the top two second-in-command Republicans in both bodies will take the lead in "bringing some consensus" to the issues, says House speaker-elect Dave Clark, R-Santa Clara.

Last month, after being unanimously elected speaker by the new 53-member GOP House caucus, Clark came out of that caucus with a pointed reform plan he said had the backing of the other members of House leadership.

Clark said then that he wanted his caucus to back that plan, also.

Yet during a closed caucus Monday that mainly focused on the state's difficult budget issues, the GOP representatives talked ethics but did not come to definitive votes on Clark's reform plan.

Incoming Senate majority leader Sheldon Killpack, R-Syracuse, and House majority leader Kevin Garn, R-Layton, will head up the effort of boiling down general reform ideas into specific legislation, said Clark.

Meanwhile, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., who told the Deseret News earlier this month that he would put off, for now, naming an independent ethics reform task force, says he misspoke and was misunderstood — and that he will indeed name an ethics commission sometime next month.

"We hope to name commission members in early January and they will likely meet around the same time" as lawmakers come into their annual general session on Jan. 26, said Lisa Roskelley, Huntsman spokeswoman. The commission, which will have around 20 people and include businessmen, community and religious leaders, media representatives and legislators, is not meant to "second-guess" what the Legislature may do.

Kirk Jowers, head of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, will head the governor's effort. The commission will not make any recommendations until later in the year, after lawmakers adjourn in early March.

"I'm thinking the recommendations may come in October or November, to give time for people to mull over" what the commission recommends before the 2010 Legislature, Jowers said Tuesday.

In crafting the recommendations, the commission will look at five general areas:

- Ethics, including lobbyist gifts to legislators and other elected and appointed officials.
- Campaign finance, including donation limits and personal use of campaign funds.
- Lobbying, including elected officials immediately becoming lobbyists after leaving office.
- Voting, including early voting and how and when voters can register.
- Election and nominating systems, including the party caucus and convention process and open and

closed primaries.

"The main concern is Utah laws, or lack of laws, which drives down citizens participating in our democracy," said Jowers, who is an expert on politics and elections. Utah had the fourth lowest voter turnout in the 2008 elections — which saw record voter turnout in many states, in part because of the candidacy of President-elect Barack Obama, who will be the nation's first black president.

"Our hope is that the commission can be honest brokers, and our recommendations will carry some weight with the legislators, the media and the public," said Jowers.

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