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Governor to announce ethics commission

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Utah Governor Jon Huntsman is preparing to announce a comprehensive effort to examine the state's ethics laws. The leader of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah is likely to play a key role.

One thing Utah shares with the state of Illinois is some of the most lax ethics laws in the country. It's something Gov. Huntsman hopes to change. He's expected to announce a new ethics commission in the next few weeks.

Add Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich to the list of national political notoriety. There's no direct Utah connection. But the story resonates here after a year in which bribery accusations against Utah lawmakers flew on Capitol Hill.

The head of the U of U's Center for Public Policy, David Patton, says unfortunately for politicians, the actions of one can affect public perceptions of all.

"We kind of cast them all in the same light, and so they do need to be very careful about making sure they look above reproach," he said.

The governor wants a new panel to take a long-range look at ethics. One member: the Hinckley Institute director, Kirk Jowers.

"Utah has had kind of increasing smoke over the last couple of years. So I think it is time for Utah to really evaluate where it is and what things that could be done to help not only the perception, but perhaps even the reality," he said.

Twelve ethics bills are filed for the next legislative session. Jowers says the public expects something meaty. "Ethics just to get the media off their back is not going to be long-lasting or helpful," he said.



Kirk Jowers

A recent U of U study of ethics nationwide found Utah's laws rival Illinois', as among the weakest.



David Patton

Patton said, "But they seem to do pretty much the minimum they can do. So there's a lot more that other states are doing, and Utah has the opportunity probably to do more."

Lisa Roskelley, the governor's spokesperson, says she expects the governor to unveil his plans and introduce the members of this new ethics commission sometime in the next few weeks, definitely before the next legislative session starts in late January.

Ethics is likely to be a big issue in that session. Both the House and the Senate have new leaders, and both of them say they plan to address ethics reform in the legislative session.

The big issue for lawmakers will undoubtedly be the state budget, but ethics is expected to be near the top of the agenda.

Given the ethics controversies of the last several years, we expect lawmakers to address gifts, including Jazz tickets for lawmakers from lobbyists, which has been a hot-button issue with the public. Also, we can expect lawmakers to examine the ethics process itself, in the spotlight in a major way before Election Day last fall.

It's likely some ethics measures will pass this year. The question is how tough the measures will be.

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