

# Paying for corruption

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Anti-corruption bills, which have languished in the Legislature too long, received a welcome endorsement Monday from the Senate Judiciary Committee. The bills would make corruption of public resources a crime, raise the penalties for corruption and extend the statute of limitations in some corruption cases. These bills should get swift Senate approval when it convenes next month.

One of the bills, sponsored by Sen. Ellen Karcher, D-Monmouth, and Sen. John Adler, D-Camden, targets misuse of public resources by private parties. This includes misappropriating grant money or loans or lying when bidding on government work. The higher the value of the public resource corrupted, the higher the potential penalty.

"We need to put protections in place to ensure that government dollars and resources are not wasted on corruption," Karcher said. Karcher is not a member of the Judiciary Committee but has worked closely on good-government bills with Adler, the committee chairman.

Another Karcher bill would tack on a monetary penalty for committing crimes — bribery, fraud, threats or other improper influence — involving a public contract. The fines run from \$75,000 to \$250,000 and top out at \$500,000, depending on the seriousness of the crime.

The third measure, sponsored by Sen. Peter Inverso, R-Mercer, addresses the deadline for prosecuting a corruption case. It extends the statute of limitations from five to seven years. Given the cost of corruption on the public purse, a strong argument could be made against having a deadline at all.

That's the point with anti-corruption bills. They do not exist in a vacuum because of the impact of corruption on the cost of government. Karcher is right when she equates money lost to corruption with money not available to control property taxes. These bills send a strong message that wrongdoing regarding public money will not be tolerated.

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