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Lynch prison sentence sends needed message

New Jersey's government officials need to know that if they abuse their power and break the law, they will be punished harshly.

The message from U.S. District Judge Stanley R. Chesler was clear: "Hopefully, public officials in this state will be learning from what happened here."

That's what he said Tuesday as he sentenced former state Senate President John A. Lynch Jr. to three years and three months in prison for admitted corruption.

It's a message that we hope resonates through government circles around this state.

For too many years, New Jersey has been plagued by public officials who break the public trust by abusing their power to illegally and unethically help themselves, their families and their friends.

Lynch, a longtime Democratic power broker in New Jersey who spent 20 years in the state Senate and was also mayor of New Brunswick from 1979 until 1991, pleaded guilty in September to corruption charges -- one count of mail fraud in connection with a South Brunswick project, and one count of tax evasion for the 1999 tax year related to \$150,000 he received from a deal involving land along the Raritan River in New Brunswick.

During his guilty plea, Lynch admitted that, while serving as a state senator, he accepted about \$25,000 between March 1998 and February 2002 from the Dallenbach Sand Co. of South Brunswick. In return, he did things in his capacity as a senator for the company, including sending a letter on official state Senate stationery to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to vouch for the company on a project for which it needed DEP approval.

New Jersey U.S. Attorney Chris Christie, whose office made the case against Lynch, said that since he became New Jersey's top federal prosecutor five years ago, more than 100 public officials have pleaded guilty or been convicted of corruption charges.

"There has got to come a time when public officials get the picture," Christie said outside the federal courthouse in Newark.

He's right. Eventually, elected officials and government appointees have to see that, besides going against every principle they're supposed to uphold, abusing their power can also land them in prison.

Sadly, there have been too many John Lynches in this state and there are probably far too many who, right now, are using their positions to break the rules and make money for themselves while hurting taxpayers.

We can only hope that this conviction, of someone who was once one of the state's most powerful politicians, sends a message that reverberates around New Jersey and puts fear into those politicians who lack the morals to conduct themselves ethically.

We also hope that new state Attorney General Stuart Rabner, who has already indicted one politician -- Carneys Point Mayor John M. Lake -- on corruption charges, will continue to use the vast resources of his office to root out government corruption. With both Christie's and Rabner's offices investigating leads and working diligently to convict those government officials who break the law, New Jersey might be able to shed its reputation as a den of unethical, corrupt politicians.

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