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Senator Serrano and Assemblywoman Galef Unveil Historic Legislation to Reform Member Item Distribution Process

Senator José M. Serrano (D-Manhattan/Bronx) and Assemblywoman Sandy Galef (D-Ossining) today discussed legislation they have introduced in both houses that will reform the way member items, or discretionary funds, are distributed, while setting standards for the way these appropriations are awarded and reported.

"I am proud to stand with Assemblywoman Galef, who, for years, has been at the forefront of the concept of member item reform," said Serrano. "New Yorkers have been asking for reform in many different areas, and this bill indicates a very common sense approach to this issue by adding additional layers of scrutiny and transparency to a process that, for too long, has been shrouded in mystery. The additional provisions outlined in this bill will enhance and improve the member item process and hopefully begin to restore the public's faith and inspire confidence in how community grants are given."

The Serrano/Galef bill (S7007, A10116) empowers state agencies to oversee the spending of the allocated funds, requires them to publicly report on the usage of distributed member items. In addition, awarded legislative grants, along with the name of the recipient groups and the sponsoring legislator, must be made public 24 hours in advance of budget approval to allow for public comment. The bill also calls for legislators and member item recipients to report any possible conflicts of interest in advance of budget approval.

Furthermore, the legislation requires that any groups wishing to receive member items be pre-certified by the Attorney General. Pre-certification will include the verification of the organization's tax status, as well as compliance with having filed the mandatory annual report on any previously received legislative grants.

"For years, Attorney General Andrew Cuomo has been a leader in the member item reform process, and his office has worked closely with us to craft this bill," said Serrano. "I applaud his foresight and initiative on this very important issue."

"I am glad to join Senator Serrano and good government organizations in calling for an overhaul of the member item process in both our Houses and the Governor's Office," said Assemblywoman Galef. "I have long believed that if we must have member items, then the process must be evenhanded and nondiscriminatory. This legislation accomplishes these two goals in addition to making the process transparent and accountable. The process is transformed into one where those organizations who deliver valuable local services and worthy programs, are those which are funded through impartial and consistent procedures. Since all legislators will receive an equal amount of member item funding, then programs in each legislative district are treated fairly."

The legislation also states that all members of both the Senate and Assembly must receive equal shares of the member items allocated to each house. Currently, discretionary funds are disproportionately distributed, with the majority party receiving a significantly larger portion of funds.

Assemblywoman Galef does not participate in the Assembly's member item process. Today Senator Serrano announced that he, too, will not be accepting or distributing member item funds.

"Until the system becomes more equitable and transparent, certain districts and organizations will continue

to benefit at the expense of others, and that does not make for a better New York," said Serrano. "We must all work together to find the best ways to distribute the state's dollars, and that requires making tough choices that will benefit New Yorkers in the long term."

"Now more than ever we need reform. This bill will make the member item process fair, equitable and open," said Assemblywoman Amy Paulin "It prevent conflicts of interest in the distribution of member item funds and increases transparency in the process."

The lawmakers were also joined by members of good government groups from across the state, including Citizens Union of the City of New York, and the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG).

"Citizens Union supports the member item reform legislation proposed by Assemblymember Galef and Senator Serrano, and believes that it will provide a more accountable system in which to fund community organizations," said Dick Dadey, Executive Director of Citizens Union. "The current system lacks transparency and proper accounting of the use of state funds."

"Taxpayers need to know that their dollars are being spent for a legitimate public purpose and this legislation creates a far more desirable decision-making system that will enhance accountability through greater transparency. Additionally, this bill will require equal distribution of member items between the majority and minority parties, and between rank-and-file legislators and party leadership. Communities across the state should not receive divergent amounts of member item money simply because their representative is in a different party or because they are new to the legislature. We encourage the State Legislature and Governor to promptly enact member item reform."

"Member items have been a source of controversy and scandal," said Blair Horner, NYPIRG Legislative Director. "The program must be reformed or eliminated. We applaud Senator Serrano and Assemblywoman Galef for putting forward this common sense reform and urge speedy action this session."

"Common Cause/NY is glad to see Senator Serrano and Assemblywoman Galef taking up the issue of how to properly regulate member items," said Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY. "If we are to have member items at all (a question that deserves serious examination), then there is no question that the straightforward safeguards against misuse of public money for political or self-serving purposes that this bill sets up are unassailable and long overdue."