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**Ryan backs lobbyists on his ethics panel**

By Dave McKinney and Fran Spielman

Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD-Gov. Ryan angrily defended his choices for a new state ethics commission Thursday amid concerns the panel is controlled by lobbyists and campaign contributors.

"You can call them whatever you want. They're all solid, ethical, good people who'll serve me and the state very well in the position they have been given," the governor said.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported Thursday that the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform questioned Ryan's decision to appoint four lobbyists to the seven-member panel to help enforce the state's ethics law, which took effect in January.

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Chicago) a main author of the law, said such concerns are understandable given the public's mistrust of government.

"I was surprised that the governor wasn't more mindful of the possible perceptions that were raised by putting lobbyists on the commission," Obama said. "I think it would be advisable to put people on the commission that are not perceived to have major interests in Springfield."

The governor's commission is chaired by longtime aide Roger Bickel and includes William Roberts, a former U.S. attorney and former chief legal counsel to Gov. Jim Edgar; former Democratic Senate President Philip J. Rock, and Cook County Democratic chairman Thomas Lyons.

All four are registered lobbyists. They or their firms represent riverboat casinos, horse-racing interests and Chicago Blackhawks owner William Wirtz, among others.

"For Sen. Obama to criticize the chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party is really a stretch. What Sen. Obama is doing is calling Tom Lyons' ethics and Sen. Rock's ethics into question," Ryan spokesman Dave Urbanek said.

Ethics commissions under Ryan and other constitutional officers must comprise former government officials, members of the public and current state employees within an office.

The commissions can issue fines and recommend disciplinary action against anyone who violates the law, which includes a ban on gifts.

Bickel and two other commission members, Mark Novak and Nancy Easum, are current or former Ryan employees and jointly contributed more than $ 7,000 to Ryan's campaign fund between mid-1994 and last December, state election records show.

J. Terrence Brunner, executive director of the Better Government Association and a frequent Ryan critic, wondered why the governor would appoint contributors to such sensitive positions when a federal bribery probe has placed a spotlight on his campaign's fund-raising practices involving employees.

"He gets all this flak for shaking down his employees, and he winds up taking campaign contributors and putting them on his ethics board. So much for ethics," Brunner said.

Urbanek dismissed Brunner's allegations.

"To question their integrity, to question their ethics from someone like Terry Brunner, who's a publicity-seeking bloodhound, is just absurd," Urbanek said.