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STATE REP. RITA GAVE ALLY'S DAUGHTER FREE RIDE TO U. OF I.;

Perk for family of Ald. Beale worth about $37,000

By Dave McKinney and the Better Government Association

In state Rep. Robert Rita's legislative district - which covers a swath of Chicago's south suburbs and part of the city s far South Side - just one out of 10 people has a college degree.

The daughter of Ald. Anthony Beale (9th) - a friend and political ally of Rita - is being given the chance to buck those odds and earn a degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign tuition-free courtesy of a coveted "legislative scholarship" handed to her by Rita.

That four-year freebie to the state's flagship state university is valued at nearly $37,000.

It's the latest in a string of cases in which the children of political insiders have been given one of the two four-year scholarships to a state university that each Illinois legislator gets to award every year to students who live in their district. Legislators also can split the scholarships, giving a partial tuition break to as many as eight students a year.

Beale and Rita (D-Blue Island) have close ties. Beale has endorsed Rita for re-election in the past, calling him a "strong" ally. Beale's wife works for Rita. Dana Beale is a part-time, $400-a-month legislative aide at Rita's district office who, until recently, was also making $76,684 a year working for Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White. And Rita has contributed more than $20,000 to the alderman's election campaigns over the years.

Beale, who makes $110,556 a year as a Chicago alderman, says none of that put his daughter, Taylor Beale, at the head of the line when Rita was deciding which students would get four years of free college tuition.

"She filled out the application, submitted it to the state rep and received the scholarship," says Beale.

He describes his 21-year-old daughter as a good student who earned the tuition waiver on merit.

Rita, now serving his fifth two-year term in the Illinois House, voted against legislation in 2010 that would have ended the scholarship perk. He declined interview requests about the tuition waiver for Beale's daughter. He also won't say how many applications he gets or discuss how he chooses who'll get the college freebie.

He responded to an interview request with a written statement in which he says Beale's daughter was deserving. He says not picking her would have been tantamount to discrimination.

The legislator's statement reads in part: "A National Honor Society scholar, a 'Who's Who Among High School Students' member, a city champion on the girls' varsity tennis team, a community Little League volunteer and a sterling recommendation from her principal at Whitney Young Magnet High School were the reasons that earned Taylor Beale a tuition waiver. Denying such an academically talented and civic-minded student a tuition waiver because of her father's job would amount to blatant discrimination against a promising African-American student."

The state's public universities and community colleges are on the hook for the estimated $13.5 million a year to cover the cost of the education the scholarships cover.

Legislative scholarships have been a source of contention in Springfield. Last year, Gov. Pat Quinn tried to abolish the program.

That was after the Sun-Times and the Better Government Association reported that state Rep. Dan Burke (D-Chicago) had awarded one of the tuition waivers to the daughter of his former secretary and whose Downstate address was outside of Burke's Southwest Side district. After that report, Burke said he supported eliminating the perk.

Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) blocked Quinn's effort to get rid of the legislative scholarship program last fall, saying the governor had overstepped his authority by writing the ban into another piece of legislation that the House and Senate had approved and needed his signature to be enacted into law.