

House Bill 6 was Ohio's biggest public corruption scandal. So why haven't the laws changed?

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Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Former Ohio House Speaker [Larry Householder's arrest](#) for racketeering made national headlines. The fallout reshaped Republican leadership. But [nearly five years later](#), the laws that enabled a \$60 million bribery scheme remain largely intact.

"Forget what you learned in *Schoolhouse Rock...*," said state Rep. Bride Rose Sweeney, a Westlake Democrat. "All you need is a big enough checkbook, state laws that shield you and a legislature that is ready and willing, and your options are almost endless."

With enough dark money, she warned, it's possible to "buy yourself a speakership, change the entire makeup of the Legislature," and pass a law giving FirstEnergy a taxpayer funded, \$1 billion bailout for two nuclear plants.

To prevent another scandal like House Bill 6, Sweeney and three other Democratic lawmakers introduced a three-part reform package.

- [House Bill 250](#) would mandate the disclosure of dark money donors. These are funds raised to influence elections by nonprofit organizations called 501(c)(4) organizations that, under current law, are not required to disclose their contributors.
- A second, forthcoming bill would target petition-blocking tactics used to stifle citizen-led ballot campaigns.
- The third proposal would stop individuals and companies who donate to political candidates from receiving state contracts.

"The House bill 6 scandal was not a one off, was not a fluke," Sweeney said. "It was not one man or a group of bad actors. It was business as usual. You can hear the

conspirators taped on FBI wiretaps saying this is how it's done. This is how it works."

But when it comes to dark money, these bills land in a legal gray zone shaped by U.S. Supreme Court rulings that limit how far states can go in regulating campaign donations and spending.

"There are limits to what we can do based upon Supreme Court decisions..." Gov. Mike DeWine said. "But transparency is something, an area that we probably can move toward and not have a problem with the Supreme Court decision."

House Speaker Matt Huffman, a Lima Republican, also told reporters the state's hands are tied.

"That's an issue that's outside of the Statehouse," he said.

Huffman added that, in his view, dark money groups aren't especially effective at winning elections.

"We don't have anything like that in our political campaign," he said. "So if there's some specific suggestion that if something someone is doing is illegal, I'd like to know about it."

Records obtained by Cleveland.com in May 2024 showed a dark-money nonprofit called Liberty Ohio received \$300,000 from FirstEnergy while it was pushing for House Bill 6.

A FirstEnergy lobbyist referred to the group in a 2019 email as "Huffman's C4," though records do not suggest Huffman controlled the group or did anything illegal.

Political nonprofits like Liberty Ohio are legal and common, but federal prosecutors say such groups were used to facilitate FirstEnergy's \$60 million bribery scheme.

The House Speaker also told reporters that he's working on his own ethics reform bill, though it likely won't be introduced until fall.

"A lot of times, legislators simply don't know the rules," Huffman said, adding that he'd like to consolidate ethics oversight into a single agency.

It's not the first time he's made that promise.

In 2023, Huffman said he [wanted to take a "more proactive" approach](#) to ethics education before leaving the Senate in 2024 due to term limits.

As lawmakers talk reform, the House-passed budget would [eliminate the Ohio Elections Commission](#), a bipartisan panel that enforces campaign finance laws. Instead, its duties would be handed over to the Secretary of State or local boards of elections.

Their reasons for eliminating the commission include what they see as a rise in nuisance complaints. Those cases, they argue, drag candidates and campaigns into costly, time-consuming legal battles.

Both Republicans and Democrats have pushed ethics reform since Householder's arrest, but the efforts keep stalling.

Former state Rep. Derek Merrin, a Toledo-area Republican and former Householder ally, introduced a sweeping bill in 2023 to tighten disclosure rules for lobbyists, utility regulators, and public officials.

His measure--[House Bill 16](#)--had two hearings over two years.

"Some people are just more worried about getting their picture taken as a state rep or holding their next fundraiser," Merrin told reporters in 2023. "We need more people that are interested in solving problems and trying to make government more honest and respected."

Democrats say the onus falls on the Republican majority. With limited power in the Statehouse, they can propose reforms--but they can't pass them without GOP support.

State Rep. Dani Isaacsohn, a Cincinnati Democrat, was elected in the wake of the Householder scandal. He expected to enter a "chastened" legislature--one eager to restore public trust and prevent future corruption.

"I was shocked when I got here to find that nothing had been done," Isaacsohn said. "That the culture hadn't changed at all. That no bills had been passed to address the deficiencies that led to the House Bill 6 scandal."