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Joneses plugged in to power; Stepson does business with firm that gets lots of help from senator

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SPRINGFIELD-At the same time Senate President Emil Jones went to unusual lengths to block a Commonwealth Edison rate freeze, his stepson's computer-consulting firm was on the payroll of the utility's corporate parent.

Late Wednesday, a top Jones aide said the Senate leader was unaware of his stepson's utility deal until being told of it by the Chicago Sun-Times.

Exelon Corp. confirmed Synch-Solutions, a firm owned by Jones' stepson John Sterling, is one of four information-technology companies it employs to provide "software integration services."

The disclosure set off questions about why Jones did not publicly disclose his familial ties to the utility, and prompted a call from Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn for Jones to "abstain" from any further negotiations or votes on rate-freeze legislation this spring.

"I don't think it's healthy for the legislative process," Quinn said when told of the relationship. "Obviously, the public won't be happy at all to find out there are interests legislators have that connect to major bills that affect the lives and pocketbooks of families and businesses in Illinois, literally millions of people."

Jones spokeswoman Cindy Davidsmeyer said her boss could not have disclosed any potential conflict because he did not know of Sterling Jones' deal with Exelon until the Sun-Times' questions.

"He had no knowledge," Davidsmeyer said.

Unusual legislative ploy

Exelon hired Synch-Solutions in 2004, but the utility refused Wednesday to say how much it was paying the firm or whether it thought the relationship posed a conflict of interest for Jones.

"I think I've given you all the information I'm able to give you," Exelon spokeswoman Jennifer Medley said.

On its Web site, Synch-Solutions listed Exelon as one of its clients as recently as Tuesday. By Wednesday, the firm appeared to have pulled that client list.

Sterling denied a previous interview request about his business.

On April 20, Jones signed off on an almost-unheard-of legislative maneuver that undid a Senate vote requiring ComEd to roll back rates to 2006 levels -- 24 percent lower than what average consumers now pay.

The move amounted to a public humiliation for one of Jones' own Senate members, Gary Forby (D-Benton), because it emasculated his legislation without warning.

The plan that ultimately emerged out of the Senate gives a one-year freeze only to Ameren customers.

But that initiative appears doomed in the House, which has voted to apply a rate freeze to ComEd, as well.

Informed by the Sun-Times about Jones' familial connection to ComEd's parent, Forby predicted residents in his district would not be pleased.

"I think my people would probably not like this and maybe think that's one of the reasons President Jones done this to me," Forby said.

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