

Illinois PIRG

Standing Up To Powerful Interests

Illinois Public Interest Research Group
Citizen Agenda: An Update For Members Of Illinois PIRG

WINTER 2010 • Vol. 20, No. 4

Find links to resources and actions at www.illinoispirg.org/newsletters

Making Health Care Work

Law Boosts Health Insurance Oversight

After nearly two years of research and advocacy by Illinois PIRG staff, the Illinois General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a bill on Oct. 29 that will increase the accountability and transparency of health insurance companies.

The Insurance Rate Fairness Act (House Bill 3923), expected to be signed into law by Gov. Quinn, provides consumers for the first time the opportunity to have an external, independent review when they are denied a claim for health care by their insurance company.

"In Illinois, the lack of oversight of the insurance industry has led to an unpredictable, unaffordable insurance market for small businesses and families," said Brian Imus, Director of Illinois PIRG. "Now when the citizens of Illinois are denied a health care claim or their insurance company drops their coverage, there is someone they can turn to for help."

The legislation also requires a standard application that will allow Illinois consumers to more easily compare premium rates offered by different insurance companies and requires insurance companies to provide detailed information about their premiums and expenditures. This helps consumers get the best value for their hard-earned dollar.

Illinois PIRG advocates worked closely with several public

interest and consumer groups and were championed in the General Assembly by state Rep. Greg Harris and state Sen. Heather Steans.

While this legislation does not solve all the problems Illinoisans face with health insurance, it is a good first step. "This bill sets a precedent in Illinois—we are moving toward making health insurance more accessible and affordable for consumers," concluded Imus. ■

Product Safety

Illinois PIRG Testing Finds Toys with Lead, Phthalates

On Oct. 29, Illinois PIRG released the results of testing performed for lead, phthalates and other chemicals on children's products found on Illinois store shelves. The testing found several children's products exceeding safety standards and products containing toxic phthalates recently banned by the new federal product safety law.

The testing is the first since the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, signed into law in 2008, decreased the allowable amount of lead and banned the use of six phthalates in children's toys.



Tribune photo by Michael Tercha / November 24, 2009

PROTECTING KIDS FROM UNSAFE AND TOXIC TOYS—Illinois PIRG's Brian Imus is joined by Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (left) and Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan (right) at a press conference to release a new report by Illinois PIRG on toy safety.

Member Resource

TOY SAFETY
Check on toy hazards and report dangerous toys while you shop by visiting our interactive web tool from your smart phone or home computer:
www.toysafety.mobi

"After the wave of record recalls of dangerous toys just two years ago, we're glad to see that most of the toys we tested are in compliance with the law," said Kate Lehman, field organizer with Illinois PIRG and an author of the report. "But not all toys are safe, and we must do more to prevent toxic toys from ending up on store shelves."

To help, Illinois PIRG launched a new smart phone app (www.toysafety.mobi) that allows parents to look out for dangerous toys and even report toys they think might be unsafe. ■

Government Accountability

Privatization Reform to Protect Taxpayers

At a press conference at Chicago City Hall, Illinois PIRG released a new report analyzing Chicago's experience with the lease of publicly owned assets to private companies such as the 75 year parking meter lease approved last year.



PROTECTING TAXPAYERS—Brian Imus speaks to reporters at Chicago City Hall about Illinois PIRG's new report on privatization.

Member Resource

GOVERNMENT REFORM

To learn more about policies that can protect taxpayers and the public from bad privatization deals, read Illinois PIRG's report at www.illinoispirg.org/report.



The report, "Privatization and the Public Interest," included policy recommendations on how to implement asset lease deals that protect taxpayers.

"The parking meter mess isn't just about broken meters and skyrocketing rates. It's a wake-up call for the City Council to strengthen the tools they have to make sound fiscal and policy decisions," said Alderman Scott Waguespack, chief sponsor of the proposed ordinance. "Today's proposed ordinance will help do just that by requiring basic protections before any future votes by the City Council to sell off taxpayer-owned assets."

At the press event, Aldermen Scott Waguespack introduced the Public Interest-Ordinance on Leasing City Assets a new ordinance that will improve the ability of the City Council Aldermen and the public to scrutinize future lease agreements.

Among the recommendations to protect taxpayers are measures to help ensure the public receives fair long-term value for the assets that are leased and greater transparency at every step in the development of future lease agreements with private interests. ■

Public Health

Coalition Presents Public Health Forum

Illinois PIRG co-hosted the Public Health Forum on Toxic Chemicals and Disabilities at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The event provided an opportunity for concerned parents, public health officials and children's advocates to learn more about the link between toxic chemical exposure and disabilities in children.

Approximately one in six American children exhibits some form of developmental delay. Every week, new science links the increase in exposure to toxic chemicals to these and other serious chronic health problems.

Exposures to lead, mercury and chemicals in plastics and personal care products can harm brain development and contribute to learning and developmental disabilities. But the vast majority of the 80,000 chemicals used in commerce have never been screened for human health impacts.

Speakers at the event included Dr. Peter Orris, professor and chief of service, occupational and environmental medicine at the University of Illinois in Chicago and State Rep. Elaine Nekritz. ■

Financial Reform

New Credit Card Law, But Banks Resist

In May, President Obama signed the PIRG-backed Credit Card Act, following years of our advocacy against unfair credit card practices. However, while Congress gave the banks until next February to prepare for compliance with the law, there have been widespread complaints that banks have instead used that period to gouge consumers.

Illinois PIRG pushed to accelerate the start date to Dec. 1. In November, the House passed PIRG-backed legislation to do just that, but similar legislation stalled in the Senate.

Dec. 1 came and went, but Illinois PIRG continues to oppose rules proposed by the Federal Reserve, which would allow banks to evade many parts of the new law once it is implemented. This includes provisions that prohibit retroactive rate increases and over-limit fees and use free pizza to entice college students to sign up for cards. ■



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Be An Advocate For Illinois' Future With Illinois PIRG's Planned Giving Program.

You can be remembered as someone who cared enough to leave a legacy of activism on behalf of Illinois consumers and ensure the future health of our state's democracy by making a bequest to Illinois PIRG.

For information, call: 1-800-841-7299, or e-mail plannedgiving@illinoispirg.org.

Privatization And The Public Interest

An alarming number of new proposals in cash-strapped municipalities and states are turning over the control of public assets, including roads, water works, airports and even parking meters, to private companies.

While companies do pay for the right to lease public assets, our experience proves that in the long run, these deals are almost invariably stacked against the public.

Deals Disadvantage The Public

Indiana and Chicago both recently signed multi-billion dollar leases on major toll roads (for 75 and 99 years, respectively).

As a result, drivers are already paying higher tolls on those roads and the state governments have less power to manage the operation of the roadways. Such problems may persist for decades to come.

Chicago also privatized its parking garages and parking meters. In exchange, the private company operating the garages and meters can write tickets, and the city must pay if it chooses to reduce parking spots or the hours when meters operate.

While the system has been met with a great deal of protest, Mayor Richard Daley is seeking to sell off Midway Airport and reportedly the city's water system as well.

We Can Turn The Tide

Despite the downsides, the revenue that can be generated by privatization deals can be enticing for governments struggling to close a budget deficit.

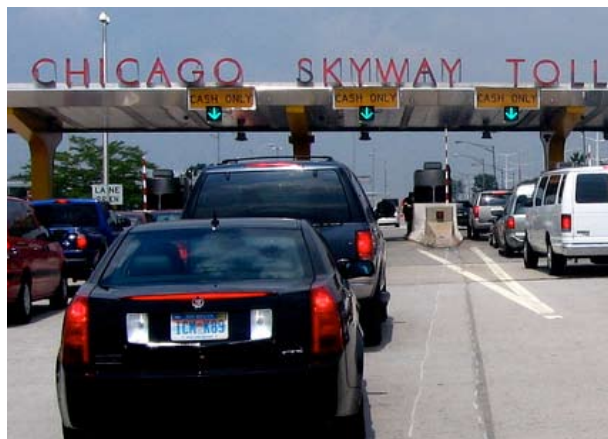
Our experience has proven that, though it may be an uphill battle, we can help to stop these short-sighted deals from advancing.

When New Jersey's former governor, Jon Corzine, proposed privatizing the New Jersey Turnpike and other toll roads, NJPIRG led a campaign to ensure that any deal

uphold a half-dozen principles designed to safeguard the public.

Thousands of New Jersey citizens signed our petition in support of the principles. Eventually, the governor reversed his position, deciding not to lease the toll roads. Since then, we've worked to prevent bad deals in Florida, Pennsylvania, Texas and Michigan.

PIRG advocates have handed out hundreds of factsheets to legislators and spoken at national conferences to make sure state legislators don't hear only from lobbyists



Flickr user Matthew McVicker under a Creative Commons license

CHICAGO SKYWAY — Drivers already are paying higher tolls after Chicago leased the Skyway toll road.

pushing privatization deals with few public protections. And in Chicago, Illinois PIRG released a report outlining the terms for any good deal for future privatization of public assets. The city alderman sponsoring an ordinance that would require any potential deal to meet our high standards joined Illinois PIRG for the release. ■

To Our Members

Dear Illinois PIRG member,



Passage of the Insurance Rate Fairness Act (see page 1) demonstrates that, with careful research combined with grassroots advocacy, we can take on powerful interests and win.

Make no mistake, the insurance industry had their lobbyists in full force down in Springfield to stop any legislation that would increase transparency and accountability on how they spend consumers' premium dollars.

We're gearing up for our legislative session and will be taking this winning formula to other important issues. For example, we've spent the past year researching toxic chemicals found in consumer products and in our communities. We're meeting with lawmakers about this research and discussing what policies could best protect our health from chemicals like toxic bisphenol-A found in baby bottles.

Of course, I expect a big fight from special interests like The Chemical Manufactures of Illinois. In 2010, we can overcome these well funded interests by demonstrating the support for toxics policy reform from Illinoisans with e-mails, letters and phone calls.

With your help, I look forward to highlighting a victory reducing the use of dangerous toxic chemicals and other important issues at the end of the year.

Sincerely,

Brian Imus
State Director
info@illinoispirg.org

Illinois PIRG Citizen Agenda

This newsletter is published three times a year by the Illinois Public Interest Research Group. You can receive the newsletter through your e-mail. Just go to our Web site to sign up.

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**Standing Up
To Powerful Interests**

CITIZEN ADVOCATE

VOLUME 20, NO. 4

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Reining In Wall Street

House OKs New Wall Street Rules

Just prior to the holiday recess, the House Financial Services Committee passed a comprehensive package of bills that would set new rules for Wall Street.

The legislation includes an Illinois PIRG-backed Consumer Financial Protection Agency (CFPA) with the power to prevent dangerous financial products—including certain types of sub-prime loans—from being put on the market.

Illinois PIRG’s Consumer Program Director Ed Mierzwinski testified several times before Congress, advocating the CFPA as part of comprehensive financial reform. During a hearing last year at the beginning of our push, Mierzwinski told the House Financial Services Committee that a CFPA “focused on credit and payment products ... targets the most significant underlying causes of the massive regulatory failures that occurred.”



PERSISTENT ADVOCATE—PIRG’s Ed Mierzwinski has testified 5 times in favor of new rules for Wall Street.

To make the CFPA a reality, Mierzwinski and Illinois PIRG’s Washington Office Director Gary Kalman are among the leaders of a coalition of 200 organizations that is also fighting for transparency in the \$500 trillion currently traded on so-called “shadow markets” and new rules to ensure that no bank or investment firm is allowed to gamble with taxpayer money.

A companion bill has been introduced in the Senate, and we expect final votes in the spring of 2010. ■

Illinois PIRG’s Mission
 When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, Illinois PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. Illinois PIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, result-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

Citizen Agenda Credits
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Design: Design Action Collective & Public Interest GRFX (215) 985-1113. Printed on recycled paper.