

Crazy Eddie's cousin stars in state Republican hearing on public corruption



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By DEREK HARPER Statehouse Bureau, 609-292-4935 | Posted: Monday, August 17, 2009

TRENTON - You want to prevent public corruption?

If you ask Crazy Eddie's cousin: That's insane.

No matter the penalties or high-profile busts, little can be done, Sam E. Antar said. "Crooks," as he called them, always believe they won't be caught.

Antar was the chief financial officer of Crazy Eddie, a New York-area electronics store equally famous for its low prices and loud ads screaming "his prices are insane." The family-run firm overseen by Eddie Antar went bankrupt in 1989 after federal officials prosecuted it for years of fraud. In the years since, Sam Antar has lectured on white-collar crime through his Web site.

Antar, of Brooklyn, N.Y., was the star of a three-hour public corruption hearing Monday held by the state Assembly Republican Policy Committee.

Wiry, animated and admittedly corrupt, Antar got laughs when he took his seat and thanked the five Republican assemblymen on the panel "for inviting the only member of the criminal class."

When political consultant George Dredden suggested regular polygraph tests for state politicians, Antar supported it, saying they should be used for anti-corruption screenings. He said Crazy Eddie staffers were regularly subject to polygraph exams to ensure they were not revealing their schemes to law enforcement officials.

Antar also advocated paying bounties to whistle-blowers.

But he said the best thing to reduce corruption would be putting a greater emphasis on white-collar crime investigations, coupled with greater available information and increased business disclosure.

With the number of victims, white-collar crime is more socially devastating than almost any other crime, he said.

In many cases, he said, law enforcement officials suspect that something is amiss. But these crimes only get solved when someone gets in trouble and agrees to become a witness for the state.

Antar cited Solomon Dwek, the star witness in last month's massive, 44-person federal roundup that included charges of political corruption, money laundering and kidney sales. "The feds knew it was going on for years," Antar said, "but didn't have someone on the inside."

Other elected officials and academics who testified called for stronger campaign finance laws with lower contribution limits for individual races, aggregate limits for donors and greater barriers for "wheeling," or exceeding existing limits with indirect contributions to party officials. Others said pensions should be stripped from corrupt officials.

Joseph Marbach, acting dean for the College of Arts and Sciences at Seton Hall University, noted the state's long, sordid history of corruption and public contentment.

Marbach, an assistant political science professor, said that last year marked the 300th anniversary of the British government's recall of Colonial Gov. Edward Hyde, 3rd Earl of Clarendon, on charges of land speculation and bribery. Furthermore, he said, Woodrow Wilson's 1910 gubernatorial victory was the last governor's race that turned on an anti-corruption reaction.

Marbach called for state legislative elections that are actually competitive, open primaries, enacting limits on holding multiple paid positions and creating an elected attorney general, such as Pennsylvania has.

Others said officials' sense of entitlement should be pared back. Former state Sen. Bill Schluter, a Republican of Pennington, Mercer County, said that as a result of entitlement, "we have a culture of corruption in the state of New Jersey."

But ultimately, Antar said laws can only help so much. His experience taught him that most people really don't understand the ethicsless criminal mind.

"Ethical people help criminals a lot," he said, "because their ethics give us freedom."

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