

Assembly speaker uses money to control members

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez single-handedly doles out millions in public funds each year to his 80 members: No vote, no committee, no debate.

Like speakers before him, the Assembly Democrat gives and can take away, handing out or withholding leadership posts that can boost office budgets by six-figure sums. Assembly rules give him sole authority to control purse strings, with no appeal.

The power of his position differs from operations in the smaller state Senate and can be necessary in wrangling votes from an unruly house.

Yet the public's inability to monitor the speaker's financial decisions came into sharper focus this year after a dispute between Pérez and one of his own caucus members. When The Bee and Los Angeles Times asked that records of Pérez's budgetary deals with individual lawmakers be made public, the Assembly said no.

Former and current members, some of whom will only speak privately, note that other speakers have used the powers of the office to impose party discipline. But Pérez, they say, mishandled the public records controversy and is an especially demanding leader.

Assemblyman Tony Mendoza concedes that he has felt the speaker's wrath.

The Artesia Democrat's office allocation was cut by about \$80,000 last December when Pérez demoted him from Rules

Committee member to alternate. Mendoza declined to discuss why, saying simply, “things happen for a reason, it’s only obvious.”

Mendoza, a five-year legislative veteran, said Pérez is aggressive with Democrats in imposing his will on key votes – sometimes demanding caucus unanimity when it isn’t necessary.

“I’ve worked with a few other speakers, and I don’t think they’ve taken it to this extreme,” Mendoza said.

Robin Swanson, Pérez’s spokeswoman, said he operates honorably within an Assembly system that has existed for decades. He was elected speaker by members from both parties and bases his decisions on public benefit, she said.

“The speaker makes decisions about who will serve in positions of leadership and chair committees in the Assembly based on what he thinks is best for the people of California,” Swanson said.

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