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Panel: Root out courts' political plums

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The trough may soon go dry.

The city's top political bosses and their law firms would be banned from taking lucrative court appointments under sweeping reforms proposed yesterday by a state panel investigating court patronage.

The Commission on Fiduciary Appointments also called for an end to the cronyism that permits judges to assign guardianships, receiverships and other legal duties to a favored few.

To help achieve that, the panel said, lawyers who get picked for such jobs should be limited to $25,000 in fees per year and judges would be barred from taking appointments for two years after they leave the bench.

Assemblyman Herman (Denny) Farrell (D-Manhattan), the new state Democratic Party chairman, called the proposed ban against political leaders a "witch hunt."

But party leaders wield considerable influence over who gets elected to the bench. A Daily News investigation this year found that the law firms of the city's top pols reap hundreds of thousands of dollars in court appointments every year.

The commission found three such cases, noting "the sheer number of appointments [party bosses] and their law firms have received raised a troubling perception that political considerations may be influencing these appointments."

The panel did not identify the party bosses or firms, but The News' look at court records showed that Queens Democratic boss Thomas Manton's law firm and that of state Sen. Guy Velella, the Bronx GOP leader, had reaped the big bucks. Neither Manton nor Velella returned calls seeking comment.

The commission was appointed in February 2000 by state Chief Judge Judith Kaye after the release of a letter in which two Brooklyn lawyers moaned to Democratic leaders that they had been denied appointments despite years of loyalty.

Farrell, who is not a lawyer, said that if political leaders are barred from taking assignments, officers of local bar associations, which help screen and select judges, also should be barred.

"There's my politics and there's bar association politics. If they are going to cut politics out, then they have to take politics out completely," he said. After a 90-day public hearing period, the commission's recommendations will go to the state Court of Appeals for its consideration.

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