

Bill to steer state investment away from companies that boycott Israel advances



Bill sponsors Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, and Sen. Ira Silverstein, D-Chicago. (File/AP)

A House committee passed a bill Wednesday steering state investment away from companies considered hostile toward Israel.

Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, is the House sponsor of Senate Bill 1761, which would create the Illinois Investment Policy Board. The board would create a list of companies that maintain questionable positions on international politics, including openly boycotting Israel.

"This is going to be a much more efficient way of combining all of the countries that the pension systems need to keep an eye on," Feigenholtz said.

If the bill becomes law, the pension system and the Illinois State Board of Investment would not be allowed to invest in companies that boycott Israel or ones that have friendly relations with countries like Sudan and Iran. The committee passed the bill by a 10-0 vote.

Feigenholtz said the point of the board is to make a consolidated list of the companies for pension systems and the Board of Investment to stay away from.

The bill does not prevent Illinois companies from boycotting Israel.

"Passing a bill like this is a codification of our relationship with Israel and basically saying, 'We'll protect your First Amendment rights if you choose to boycott, but we're not going to invest in a corporation that does that,' " she said.

The board would consist of seven unpaid members: three appointed by pension systems and four by Gov. Bruce Rauner, a supporter of the bill. The board would meet quarterly to update the list.

"We need to do our part to stand up to anti-Semitism whenever and however it appears," Rauner spokeswoman Catherine Kelly said. "This historic bipartisan legislation does just that by making Illinois the first state in the nation to divest its public pension funds from companies that boycott Israel."

Sen. Ira Silverstein, D-Chicago, sponsored the legislation in the Senate, where it passed by a 49-0 vote, with Democratic Sens. Kwame Raoul and Patricia Van Pelt of Chicago and Steve Landek of Bridgeview voting "present."

Roey Gilad, Israel's consul general to the Midwest, addressed the House on March 26, talking about the special cultural and economic bonds Illinois and Israel share. Feigenholtz said it was this special connection that made her sponsor the bill.

"Illinois has a very unique and close relationship with the state of Israel," Feigenholtz said. "We share a lot of scientific information and have close relationships with technology and the health care profession."

The bill now moves to the House floor for a final vote.

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