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Angry homeowners blast Bruno for stand against insurance bill

**ALBANY BUREAU
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ALBANY - Two property owners whose insurance companies have refused to pay claims for suspicious fires criticized Senate Joseph Bruno, R, Brunswick, yesterday for blocking a bill to make it easier to sue such insurers.

With the backing of two consumer-lobbying groups, the two owners said Bruno had bottled up the bill because he had taken hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions over the years from insurance companies.

Bruno said the bill would raise the cost of premiums for everyone and the campaign cash he had gotten from insurers had nothing to do with his opposition.

The measure, which has passed the Assembly, allows punitive damages and payment of attorneys' fees from insurers if they lose a lawsuit filed about a disputed claim. Now if insurers lose, they have to pay only the amount of the claim - a protection that activists said yesterday means insurers have nothing to lose by denying a claim.

"(Bruno) knows that he's been captured (by insurance companies)," said Tom Cameron, a retired cook who said he has yet to collect a \$68,000 claim for a storage building that burned on his Rensselaer County property. "But there's not enough pressure being brought upon him. He's squirming out."

Also complaining about Bruno yesterday was Martin Goldstein, whose insurance company won't pay a \$520,000 claim on his Bedford, Westchester County, house that burned in 1994.

"We lost everything," said Goldstein, a marketing consultant. "We walked out with nothing. Our whole house, our memories and everything, and I swore that never again

would I let someone be a victim of an insurance company."

Bruno, who the lobbying group Citizen Action said had taken more than \$200,000 in insurance company contributions, said later claims that he sold out to the insurance industry are false.

"Any interest group, anytime they want to try and be negative and make a point, seems to focus on campaign contributions . . . That's just plain nonsense," Bruno said.

Bruno said making it easier to sue could increase insurance costs. He also noted that Goldstein's insurance company is investigating the possibility of arson.

"All I'm saying is that we're trying to be very careful with this kind of legislation," Bruno said.

The measure has passed the Democratic-controlled Assembly and had made it out or the Senate insurance Committee, whose chairman, Sen. Guy Veleva, R-Bronx, is co-sponsoring the measure.

It has not come up for a vote on the Senate floor.