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BRUNO CRITICIZED ON INSURANCE LAWSUIT BILL

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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, on Monday for blocking a bill to make it easier to sue such insurers.

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

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

The measure, which has passed the Assembly, allows punitive damages and payment of attorneys' fees from an insurer if they lose a lawsuit filed over a disputed claim. Now if they lose, they have to pay only the amount of the claim - a protection that activist said Monday 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 Monday 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 has taken more than \$200,000 in insurance company contributions for GOP candidates, said later that claims that he's 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 " " The" public has come to understand that in the political process, people make contributions, but the contributions are totally unrelated to the issues."

Bruno said making it easier to sue could increase insurance costs for everyone. 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 added.

The measure has passed the Democratic-controlled Assembly, and had made it out of the Senate Insurance Committee, whose chairman Sen. Guy Velella, R-Bronx, is co-sponsoring the measure. But Bruno has not allowed it to come up for a vote on the Senate floor.

Radio ads criticizing Bruno for the insurance bill began running on stations in his district on Monday.