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BRUNO TAKEN TO TASK

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Group claims majority leader protecting insurance industry

By Steve Nelson
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ALBANY - A new group looking to hold Senate Majority leader Joseph L Bruno's feet to the legislative fire is coming to town Monday to fuel the coals around his apparent unwillingness to call for a vote on legislation allegedly aimed at leveling the playing field between insurers and policyholders.

Martin Goldstein, president and founder of Citizens Against Unfair Insurance Practices, and Richard Kirsch, executive director of Citizen Action of New York, plan to unveil an information and radio blitz "urging Sen. Bruno's constituents to demand that he protect them and not the insurance industry."

Specifically, Goldstein said he wants to demand that the Brunswick Republican release a bill that would

allow property, casualty and auto policy holders to hold an insurance company financially liable for denying or

delaying payment for legitimate claims or other unfair or dishonest claim settlement practices.

The bill would allow policyholders to sue insurance companies under state law for failing to settle claims in "good faith," and allow for the recovery of legal fees and the award of compensatory and punitive damages.

The bill had languished in the Assembly for 13 years under Assemblyman Daniel Feldman, a Democrat for Brooklyn, but this year it won Senate sponsorship by Sen. John De-Francisco, a Republican from Syracuse.

The bill passed the Assembly this year in a 131-13 vote, but it has yet to come to a vote in the Senate because of Bruno's ties and obligations to the state's insurance industry, Goldstein charged.

The need for the bill is apparent, he said, adding he will bring with him Monday a resident of Bruno's home base of Rensselaer County, Tom Cameron, who Goldstein said battled unscrupulous claim practices by his insurance company after a work shed on his property burned to the ground last year. Cameron could not be reached for comment.

In the Senate, the bill was voted favorably out of its Insurance Committee. But Goldstein said Bruno since has refused to bring it to the floor for a vote of the full Senate. The bill would pass easily if it did, Goldstein claimed.

Goldstein claimed the senator's allegiance to the "big money" insurance industry began 15 years ago when three life insurance companies bought approximately a third of Coradian Corp. Bruno's telephone communications company.

"There Is nothing in place to make this a level playing field," said Goldstein, who said he formed his organization in the wake of his battle with an insurance company to get a legitimate claim paid after his home in Armonk was destroyed by fire in December 1994.

"Insurance companies can do what they want, when they want to do it just to take care of their bottom line."