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## The friends of Tom DiNapoli

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And here we thought state Comptroller Tom DiNapoli was a full-time employee of the public-sector unions.

Now it seems that he's moonlighting for the tort-law lobby, after apparently having fallen under the malign influence of a top deputy who seems to have forgotten that he no longer heads the Department of Environmental Conservation.

DiNapoli -- who makes no bones about the fact that he owes his election to a full term last year to union support -- yesterday proposed what he's calling "a response for New Yorkers in case of natural gas accidents."

The obvious first question was: What's in it for the unions?

The answer: Not so much, at least not at first glance. But what he proposes sure looks like a big fat slush fund for trial lawyers.

He wants the Legislature to assess energy producers -- in advance -- to pay potential claims related to fracking.

That's the process by which gas is extracted from shale deep underground by blasting it with a high-pressure combination of water, sand and chemicals.

DiNapoli wants to impose a surcharge on all drilling permits and also require gas companies to post surety bonds to cover any shortfall in the fund.

That might be reasonable if there were any credible evidence that fracking posed a real environmental threat.

There is none.

Indeed, even a greenie bomb-thrower like federal Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson has told Congress she is "not aware of any proven case where the fracking process itself has affected water."

Actually, it sounds more like a last-ditch effort to stand in the way of fracking -- and particularly to discourage natural-gas companies from using the process in New York by making it prohibitively expensive.

Which no doubt is why the usual gaggle of greenie groups was quick to hail DiNapoli's announcement.

Which means the scheme may well be the work of Alexander "Pete" Grannis, the veteran assemblyman who was fired last year as environmental conservation commissioner for gross insubordination -- only to be hired in January as DiNapoli's top deputy.

But you can be sure that the trial lawyers and their poodles in Albany -- led by Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Weitz & Luxenberg) -- will welcome it with open palms.

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