

The Impact of Lobbyists on the Legislature

Lobbyists. The name itself can portray a negative assumption of unethical, political behavior with government officials. Actually, most lobbyists are decent, honest people who are working for the interests of their client or group. By definition, a lobbyist represents a special interest group and attempts to influence governmental decisions on behalf of their group. Lobbying government has been around long before our country was formed. In the 19th century, the term lobbyist was synonymous with 'vote buyer' because of the belief that they corrupted Congress with money. But today, there are many honorable men and women who are professional lobbyists.

However, there are a few lobbyists and lawmakers who have chosen to abuse the privilege of representing the people. Over the past several years in Utah, unethical behavior between a few legislators and lobbyists have prompted other lawmakers to introduce legislation in helping curb the actions of a few. In the 2005 Legislative Session, for example, Democrat Ralph Becker presented a gift-ban bill to the House Rules Committee and the Republican lawmakers refused to hear the bill. In a highly unusual move, Republican Stuart Adams of Layton asked that the bill be struck from consideration. Another gift-ban bill was introduced in the Senate with the same results as Republicans defeated any Democratic attempts of legislating ethics in the legislature. Over the years, Democrats have consistently introduced bills to make lawmakers more accountable to the public only to have the Republican-controlled legislature defeat them. To be fair, there are some Republicans who would like to see their colleagues agree to such ethics type bills because of the inability to police themselves. Some would ask if there really is a problem to warrant such legislation. The answer is yes. In the past several years, watchdog groups have given the Utah Legislature low marks in areas of lobbyist's spending reports, the lack of concern for strengthening ethics, and the lenient

laws addressing conflict of interest. The Center for Public Integrity identified some areas of concern involving Utah Lawmakers:

- 44% of legislators sat on a committee with a personal professional interest.
- 24% of legislators had financial ties to organizations that lobby state government.

The CPI report also shows Utah is near the bottom nationally of not disclosing any conflicts of interest with financial ties. The reason of having disclosure laws is to protect the public from having lawmakers behave in their own self-interest.

The Republican-controlled Legislature has shown their indifference to the people of Utah. With their acceptance of weaker ethic laws, their desire to gut the GRAMA act and their closed-door meetings disguised as "Republican Caucus Meetings", it is very clear that Republican lawmakers love to hide and keep the public in the dark. Since Republican lawmakers are unwilling to show the public what they are doing, the time has come to vote in more honest and caring lawmakers. The best remedy is to elect more public officials with integrity who are dedicated to ethic reforms. For now, with our one-party government, ethic reforms and openness is a distant dream.

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