



M U L T I S T A T E

[Group launches petition drive to reign out-of-control Lansing lobbying](#)

An Michigan-based organization, registered as a ballot committee, launched a constitutional amendment ballot initiative effort to change laws in Michigan to increase government transparency, and curb rampant lobbying.

The organization, the Coalition to Close Lansing Loopholes, states on its website that corporate lobbyists have too much influence in Lansing; on every issue from workers' rights to environmental justice to public education, corporate lobbyists have played a major role in shaping our state's policy decisions, even when what they wanted would hurt working families.

“Lobbying firms spend hundreds of thousands on free food and fancy trips for members of the legislature,” the coalition stated. “Lawmakers regularly take jobs as lobbyists immediately after leaving office. Michiganders have no way of knowing what goes on behind the scenes between lobbyists and their elected officials.”

On Sept. 6, 2019, Progress Michigan announced the launching of the ballot committee. The ballot initiative, according to the ballot committee website states the initiative includes:

- Banning gifts from lobbyists to lawmakers.
- A mandatory cooling off period for elected officials leaving office before they can take a job as a lobbyist.
- More stringent reporting requirements on lobbying activities not only from lobbyists, but from lawmakers as well.

Bridge Michigan, in a Jan. 23, 2020, article stated the proposal also calls for:

- Requiring public officials and lobbyists to keep a public log of lobbying actions, including meetings and the subjects of conversations.
- Require all public communications aimed at influencing public officials, such as advertisements, to include a marker indicating who paid for them and how much they spent.
- Require lobbying logs be kept for at least six years.
- Give the Secretary of State the power to enforce the rules.

The Coalition to Close Lansing Loopholes, Bridge stated, consists of advocacy groups Progress Michigan, Michiganders for Fair and Transparent Elections, and other undisclosed partners. The coalition submitted ballot language with the state on Jan. 23, 2020. If approved, the groups would need to at least 425,059 valid signatures to place it on the Nov. 3 ballot.

The ballot language states:

“A constitutional amendment petition to regulate lobbying by adding Article III, Section 9 to the Michigan Constitution which would prohibit lobbyists and their clients from giving gifts to public officials and their immediate families; prohibit a state elective officer from being a lobbyist for 2 years after leaving office; prohibit paying lobbyists on a contingency basis; require lobbyists and their clients to register and report lobbying expenditures; require lobbyists and public officials to keep a record of lobbying activity and make it public; require identification and reporting of lobbying communications; and require enforcement by by the Secretary of State.”

The Bridge referred to the Coalition to Close Lansing Loopholes as a *“liberal advocacy group.”*

According to Influence Watch, a national watchdog, Progress Michigan is a *“left-of-center advocacy organization”* in Michigan. It is one of 22 state-level networks of Progress Now, a national organization of liberal groups started in Colorado to support left-wing networking and rapid response communications.

“Progress Michigan engages in political activity through social media and online communications, issuing news releases and comments for mainstream media outlets,” Influence Watch states. *“It primarily targets Republican candidates and officeholders, Republican-led initiatives, and conservative- or libertarian-leaning organizations.”*

[Lobbying for change](#)

A host of lobbying reforms possibly headed for the November ballot in Michigan includes two that should be adopted in Ohio as well to give citizens more faith that their state government is working for them.

Progress Michigan, a liberal group, plans to seek signatures for requirements that include a ban on lobbyists courting public officials with meals, drinks, trips, and other gifts and a mandate that lobbyists and public officials make public the substance of their phone calls, meetings, and other communications with one another.

Ohio law limits gifts to lawmakers, members of their staffs, and other public officials to \$75 per year, unless the official is participating in an event to which all members of the legislature or one of its chambers is invited or if an official receives a meal while participating in a panel, seminar, or speaking engagement.

A total ban on gifts to public officials, as proposed in Michigan, would boost the public's confidence that their officials are not being swayed by even modest gifts.

The transparency requirement would be unique and positive. Lawmakers and lobbyists would have to keep logs of the dates, duration and subject of their interactions, with both reporting on them so the public could compare those logs. Because they are seeking action from public officials, lobbyists' agendas and meetings with those officials should be an open book.

Michigan employers would, as they are in Ohio, be banned from making lobbyists' pay contingent on the success of their work on a particular bill or executive decision.

And those paying for ads seeking to sway public or public officials' position on a matter would be required to identify themselves in the advertising itself — not make the public wait for that information to appear in campaign spending reports filed later.

Ohio needs such a requirement, but it would have to demand full disclosure as evidenced by last year's fight over Toledo's Lake Erie Bill of Rights.

A group called the Toledo Jobs and Growth Coalition, which advertised against LEBOR on nine radio stations, was not Toledo-based as its name implied but backed by \$302,000 from BP Corp. North America Inc. of Houston.

The ads were dishonest, and so was their sponsoring group's name, which makes a good case for fuller disclosure of political ad sponsors in both Ohio and Michigan.

Overall, Ohio's lobbyist gift limits and disclosure requirements are stronger than Michigan's, making reforms there more urgent. But Ohio also should consider a total gift ban and making ad sponsors more transparent.

In an age of low trust in public officials at all levels, state officials in Lansing and Columbus would serve themselves and the public well by eliminating perks that offer even a hint of improper influence and giving the public a fuller view of who's trying to influence policy.