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[‘As American as apple pie’: How Miami commissioner’s aunt became a high-priced lobbyist](#)

Theme park executives hoping to build a hotel along the causeway to South Beach say they paid around \$20,000 last summer to the aunt of a Miami city commissioner to help negotiate a deal with his office in the hours leading up to a crucial vote.

After [failing the previous year](#) to convince the city to hold a voter referendum on the project at Jungle Island, real estate investment firm ESJ Capital Partners hired Barbara Hardemon to hurriedly set up meetings during the first week in June with Commissioner Keon Hardemon’s staff. Over a 48-hour stretch, they say she assisted in negotiating a deal that will steer millions into housing and economic development funds during the life of the park’s extended lease on Watson Island and helped nail down her nephew’s support for a voter referendum.

One month later, Barbara Hardemon was hired again, this time by David Beckham’s Major League Soccer franchise as it neared a [make-or-break vote on a \\$1 billion stadium and retail proposal](#). She registered three days before a scheduled vote and arranged a lunch at a waterfront restaurant between her nephew and the Mas brothers, the Miami businessmen who are part owners of the MLS franchise. Days later, Commissioner Hardemon voted in a close decision to put the proposal on the [November ballot](#).

Some companies and developers have chosen not to hire Barbara Hardemon as a lobbyist due to concerns about the perception of undue influence. But in the years since his November 2013 election, the commissioner’s aunt has emerged as a closer for some of Miami’s biggest businesses.

It’s unclear if Commissioner Hardemon has ever voted against one of her clients. In 2015, he told the Herald that “Barbara has never approached me about voting on anything.”

“My consulting company has been operating for over 20 years, more time than my nephew has been a commissioner,” Barbara Hardemon said in an interview. “I have a legal right to conduct my business in the city of Miami, including lobbying.”

As she said, Hardemon’s City Hall lobbying shop is allowed under state and local laws, which prohibit elected officials and their immediate family from profiting personally off the contracts they oversee but say nothing about their extended family. Her husband, local activist and community consultant Billy Hardemon, told the Miami Herald that lobbying “is as American as apple pie.”

But her lucrative rise from occasional City Hall lobbyist to 11th-hour power broker has blurred the lines between negotiations and nepotism. Some businesspeople told the Miami Herald that they hire the commissioner’s aunt for fear that doing otherwise would be political malpractice, but nobody wanted to be identified as saying that.

Since helping her nephew first get elected in November 2013 as his campaign consultant, Barbara Hardemon has helped the Ultra Music Festival stay in Miami after [gate-crashers trampled a security guard](#), and helped a [marina operator win a competition to take over a picturesque city boatyard on a barrier island](#). A developer hoping to build a controversial digital billboard tower hired her as he tried to negotiate a deal with Hardemon's redevelopment agency in 2015, and communications conglomerate Harris Corp. hired her in 2017 as it tried to land an \$11 million emergency radio contract.

And when Jungle Island needed to nail down votes ahead of a special meeting to consider its request to place a hotel project and lease extension on the August ballot, executives turned to Barbara Hardemon. They needed at least four of the city's five commissioners to support their project and Commissioner Hardemon had already said he planned to be out of town.

"Sometimes your presence is not needed. And sometimes it really is. We shall see," Hardemon said from the dais as he set a date for a [special hearing on Jungle Island's project](#).

That was on May 24. On June 7, the day before the vote, Barbara Hardemon registered as a lobbyist for ESJ Capital Partners, which hired her primarily to help them work with her nephew's office — where some businesses and lobbyists have found it difficult to get face time.

"She helped us set up meetings with Commissioner Hardemon's staff during the last 48 hours before our Commission vote and helped us communicate our position as it related to the timing and amount of payments to affordable housing in the City," explained Micha Dubernard, ESJ Capital's chief of staff.

The firm entered into a non-disclosure agreement with Barbara Hardemon, but Micha said they paid her "in the \$20,000 range" — a little less than what Johnson & Johnson was paying David T. Daniel per quarter as the company fought a sunscreen ban on Miami Beach, one of the few South Florida jurisdictions where [lobbyist fees are disclosed](#).

At the time, Jungle Island already had land-use attorney Alex Tachmes and C.J. Gimenez, the son of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, on its lobbying and negotiating team. Dubernard said Jungle Island, which backed off a push to get on the ballot in 2017 amid concerns from a different commissioner about protests from neighbors on the Venetian Causeway, wanted to beef up its lobbying corps in 2018 as it negotiated a public benefits agreement.

A month later, Hardemon voted again in support of one of his aunt's clients when InterMiami FC needed to get a proposal to build a \$1 billion complex at Melreese golf course onto the November ballot.

An InterMiami FC spokeswoman declined to say how much Barbara Hardemon was paid when she registered to lobby three days before a scheduled vote. The spokeswoman said that Hardemon was hired primarily to conduct "community outreach."

But it was Barbara Hardemon's role in scheduling a meeting between her nephew and the Mas brothers at a Casablanca restaurant between July 9 and July 12 that caught attention when it was mentioned in a report by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics this month as part of an investigation into lobbying disclosures around the soccer group's efforts to get the stadium plan on the ballot. Hardemon told an investigator that she set up the meeting and had lunch with Jorge Mas, Jose Mas and her nephew.

"And I sat there and had lunch," she said.

Hardemon told investigators that her primary role on Beckham's team was to help with the campaign for the voter referendum that passed in November. She said [Steve Marin](#), one of Miami's most prolific campaign strategists and lobbyists, contacted her about joining the Beckham group's lobbying team. In a separate ethics interview, Jorge Mas said he relied on Marin as his main lobbyist and didn't know if Barbara Hardemon was on the lobbying team. Barbara Hardemon described the July lunch as a "meet-and-greet," although Mas said he'd met with Keon Hardemon and his chief of staff at City Hall on another occasion before the vote. It was not clear when this meeting occurred.

It's unclear what Commissioner Hardemon knows of his aunt's contracts, or to what extent he discusses his votes with her, if at all. He was traveling and unable to comment for this story, according to his chief of staff, James McQueen. The Miami Herald submitted questions in writing to McQueen Monday afternoon but did not receive a response by a Tuesday afternoon deadline.

Lobbying isn't the only service that Barbara Hardemon and her husband, Billy Hardemon, provide.

Some businesses seeking city contracts and special approvals hire the Hardemons, or B&B Professional Consultants, to engage in "community outreach" by helping to broker meetings with local activists and establishing relationships with neighborhood groups. The couple are longtime activists themselves.

When developer Moishe Mana needed [special zoning approvals in order to pursue a massive Wynwood development project](#), the couple helped his team of consultants reach out to organizations and activists in Overtown. Michael Simkins, a developer who wanted to build a flashing LED tower and innovation district within the boundaries of a redevelopment district overseen by Hardemon, told the Miami Herald around the same time that he hired the commissioner's aunt to help him establish trust in the community as he was negotiating a public benefits agreement with the Overtown Community Redevelopment Agency.

The Beckham group explained in a statement that Barbara Hardemon "provided counsel on [reaching voters in the Overtown area](#) —sharing where canvassers should focus their outreach to educate the most voters in the area and providing insight on what materials to share with them, for example." The soccer group stated she also provided insight on the Overtown community's reaction to the plans and advised the team on which pastors to contact to reach voters.

In some cases, businesses told the Miami Herald that they pay the couple to go out into Miami's black communities because they feel more comfortable with the Hardemons working in the sunshine rather than behind closed doors. Some companies and consultants that have either hired or declined to hire the Hardemons said they didn't fear the couple working behind the scenes to kill their project, and that there was no suggestion that would happen.

Still, the allegation is made from time to time.

Miami Commissioner Miami Keon Hardemon takes part in a 2014 commission meeting.

Hector Gabino *El Nuevo Herald* file

Alex Karakhanian recently faced that accusation from a neighbor who filed a lawsuit last month pointing out that Karakhanian was spared from new and restrictive billboard laws around the

Design District in 2017 after hiring Billy Hardemon. The property owner who filed the suit, Michael Siegel, says he [lost the right to erect a billboard on his property after he refused to hire the commissioner's uncle](#).

Karakhanian said he didn't hire Billy Hardemon as a lobbyist on the mural legislation. But he said he did discuss the legislation with the commissioner's uncle and has hired Hardemon to help him with community issues in the past related to other properties he owns around Miami. He specifically mentioned a property near Liberty City, where Billy Hardemon is chairman of the city-sponsored [Martin Luther King Economic Development Corp.](#)

"I own a property in a district where Billy has a community center on [Northwest] Seventh Avenue. We just kind of talked and met to see if there's anything I could do with the community," said Karakhanian, who was specifically looking for tenants. "Nothing ended up happening."

Like others who spoke to the Herald about paying the Hardemons to conduct community outreach or help them in cities outside City Hall, he said lobbying wasn't part of the deal. And he said paying the Hardemons doesn't mean you get Keon Hardemon's vote.

"I'm pretty sure if you pull up 100 cases where Billy lobbied, it's not a one-for-one. Using that logic it would mean he's never *not* gotten what he wanted," Karakhanian said. "I'm sure that's not the case."

Billy Hardemon last registered as a City Hall lobbyist in 2007 and says he isn't a lobbyist. City registration records published since Keon Hardemon became a commissioner list about a dozen clients that have contracted Barbara Hardemon, five of which hired her before her nephew was elected.

Barbara Hardemon declined to speak to the Herald about specific clients, but said her consulting business can involve work as simple as setting up a breakfast or as detailed as running an entire political campaign. She said she has spoken directly with Keon Hardemon about her client's issues in the past, and defended her right to do so.

"I have," she said. "And I have the legal right to lobby anyone that is currently on the city of Miami commission."

[Lawmakers take aim at disclosure loopholes in Colorado lobbying laws](#)

Colorado lawmakers have introduced a measure to eliminate loopholes in lobbying laws and require more disclosure to the public, part of an effort to address [long-standing concerns](#) about transparency.

The legislation — [House Bill 1248](#) — would require more frequent reporting by lobbyists what bills they were hired to track and the position taken by their clients. Lobbyists would need to file any changes in their positions on legislation within 48 hours during the session. Now, those updates are required only once a month.

The legislation also aims to close loopholes that some lobbyists appear to use to avoid reporting income from clients. In particular, it would require lobbyists who are also attorneys to file disclosures that list their lobbying clients. And it would require individual lobbyists to not only disclose the firms where they work, but all the clients that hired them.

"I think we as elected officials are caretakers of the public trust for so long as we are in our office," said Rep. Mike Weissman, an Aurora Democrat and the bill's sponsor. "One has a

responsibility to (instill) confidence in representative government when you are an office. That is why I'm bringing this bill, to fortify public confidence in what we do at the Capitol.”

The reporting and disclosure issues were in [a Colorado Sun analysis](#) about the big money spent on lobbyists in Colorado and the lack of transparency to the public.

[The Sun found](#) that businesses, nonprofit organizations, local governments and other political interests spent an estimated \$138 million combined on lobbying from July 2014 through December. The totals are increasing with more than \$33 million spent in 2018 compared to roughly \$30 million in 2015, the analysis found.

One of the major issues identified in the report that the bill seeks to address is how lobbyists don't consistently disclose their employers. For example, some list the clients that pay them without disclosing that they are working as a subcontractor. Others list payments from other lobbying firms without identifying clients they're representing.

In 2015, the Center for Public Integrity [gave Colorado a “D”](#) for lobbying disclosure. And in 2017, KUNC reported that [several law and lobbying firms](#) failed to report income from clients, instead reporting only payments directly to lobbyists they employed.

Some of those firms began filing client payments after the report. But the Secretary of State doesn't analyze lobbying data to determine whether lobbyists and lobbying firms disclose as much as they should.

The measure still doesn't include any enforcement requirements. Now, automatic fines are levied if lobbyists file late reports. But more substantial violations require complaints to be filed by outside parties.

For instance, a state lawmaker filed a complaint in 2017 against a lobbyist who registered only his company and not his name as the principal, which is required by law. The lobbyist and attorney [was fined](#), filed a lawsuit and later had the penalty reduced by a third.

Longtime lobbyist Mike Beasley said the legislation is a good clarification to reforms enacted in 2014. But it will be difficult to enact “unless the technology in the Secretary of State's office is working,” he said.

Secretary of State Jena Griswold [said](#) that improving disclosure software is among her priorities, as is better transparency to the public.

The lobbying bill is part of that larger reform effort, led by Griswold and Democratic lawmakers, that includes measures to increase campaign advertising disclosure, limit campaign contributions to county officials and expose dark money in politics.

“This bill makes lobbyist activity more transparent, and is a good step forward in providing Coloradans with more information on special interests' influence in our legislature and elections,” Griswold said in a statement.

The legislation is scheduled for its first hearing in a House committee Tuesday.

[Boeing's Washington Influence Network Tested in 737 Max Crisis](#)

[Boeing Co.](#) has spent decades spreading big money around Washington. Now the aerospace giant will need to lean on its network of lawmakers and lobbyists as it grapples with one of the worst crises in its history.

The company has almost tripled its spending on U.S. politicians and political committees in the past decade. It's also shelled out \$15 million to \$21 million annually in the same period on lobbying in Washington -- topping spending by rivals [Lockheed Martin Corp.](#), [United Technologies Corp.](#) and other corporate giants such as [Amazon.com Inc.](#) and [Comcast Corp.](#)

Such expenditures have helped make the aviation company one of the most powerful influence brokers in the nation's capital. Its carefully cultivated relationships -- including one with President Donald Trump -- are being tested as lawmakers, regulators and federal prosecutors [scrutinize](#) the company's coziness with the Federal Aviation Administration following two catastrophic crashes of its 737 Max 8 aircraft.

An Ethiopian Airlines Max jet crashed March 10 after taking off from Addis Ababa, five months after a Lion Air Max plane went down outside Jakarta, Indonesia. Both crashes killed everyone aboard.

Planes Grounded

Senators and representatives from both parties called for the planes to be grounded, and Trump himself announced the decision to ban the Max planes from flying March 13 after the FAA wavered. The Transportation Department has ordered a full audit of the FAA's 2017 certification of the Max and the Justice Department is also investigating.

A Senate panel is [hearing](#) from government officials that oversee commercial aviation next week and also intends to call Boeing executives, pilots and other aviation industry groups in the near future.

"Everyone has pretty much turned on them," said Craig Holman, a lobbyist for corporate watchdog Public Citizen. "In the end, they may come out all right because they invest so much money in Washington."

Boeing said in a statement that its government operations team is "focused on sharing the most accurate and up-to-date information possible with members of Congress, their staff and the relevant agency officials."

Tim Keating, a former legislative director for the Clinton White House who heads Boeing's lobbying team in Washington, is well-known for working on both sides of the political spectrum. He'll especially need to leverage those relationships now.

Influence Spenders

Much of the lobbying outlay by Chicago-based Boeing -- the second-largest U.S. government contractor -- is related to defense spending, not commercial aviation. Boeing ranked 11th among the nation's top influence spenders by the Center for Responsive Politics for the \$15.1 million it spent in 2018. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce was first at \$94.8 million.

Boeing has some high-profile figures on its team, including former Representative Norm Dicks, a Democrat from Washington State who served as chairman and ranking member of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee in his final years in office. Dicks lobbied on two of the company's projects for the Pentagon, the F/A-18 Super Hornet and the KC-46A tanker plane, disclosures show. He didn't respond to a request for comment.

Boeing added Ballard Partners, founded by one of Trump's biggest fundraisers in the 2016 election, to its roster of lobbying firms in January. That month Brian Ballard and two of his colleagues registered to lobby on international trade and aviation issues, according to a

disclosure filed with the Senate Office of Public Records. Ballard declined to comment on the firm's work for Boeing.

Lobbyist Ranks

Last year the company employed 98 lobbyists, including 31 in-house, who contacted Congress and 24 federal agencies and offices on its behalf, according to federal disclosures. That was more than the 65 lobbyists that Lockheed, the largest defense contractor, employed or the 59 working for [Northrop Grumman Corp.](#)

Aerospace has been a top issue for Boeing as the company faces increased competition from upstart competitors like Elon Musk's [SpaceX](#). The bulk of its lobbying is directed at Congress, with just four of 73 reports from 2018 listing contacts with the FAA. In addition to defense issues, Boeing lobbies on a wide range of matters, including taxes, trade, health issues and the federal budget, according to its disclosures.

Shanahan Recused

Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, who spent more than three decades at Boeing, is under [investigation](#) by the Pentagon's Office of Inspector General because of allegations he improperly advocated on behalf of his former employer even though he has recused himself from decisions on Boeing contracts.

Boeing is also generous with campaign contributions. Its spending ranked third among corporate PACs in the 2018 midterms, behind only [Honeywell International Inc.](#) and [AT&T Inc.](#) Boeing spread money to more than 375 incumbent members of Congress, reports filed with the Federal Election Commission show.

The Boeing Company Political Action Committee, which is financed by employees, has expanded its contributions to federal candidates in virtually every two-year election cycle since 2000, according to data from the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

The PAC gave \$5.9 million to federal candidates and committees in the 2018 election cycle, almost three times as much as it gave in a decade earlier, FEC figures show.

Single Donations

In last year's midterm congressional election, its biggest single donations -- \$250,000 each -- went to Republican-aligned groups, including the Senate Leadership Fund that's linked to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, the American Action Network, and One Nation.

Among federal candidates, Republicans received 57 percent and Democrats got 43 percent from the Boeing PAC during the midterms, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

The Boeing PAC continues to contribute at a rapid clip in a non-election year. The Republican Governors Association, the Democratic Governors Association and the Republican State Leadership Committee, got its biggest single contributions -- each for \$100,000 -- according to the monthly report for February filed March 20 with the FEC.

Congressional Donations

In total, it gave to almost 100 members of Congress during February alone. That's more than AT&T, which has one of the most prolific corporate PACs in recent years and gave to 74 members that month.

Boeing has focused its campaign donations on incumbents of both parties, slightly favoring Democrats in some years and Republicans in others. That's a strategy that may help in this crisis.

It's also cultivated former presidents from both parties. In January, it lined up former President Barack Obama, a Democrat, as a motivational speaker for an executive retreat in Arizona, while George W. Bush, a Republican, addressed the group last year.

Similarly, Boeing [contributed](#) \$10 million to help fund Obama's library and museum in Chicago and also gave \$10 million to the Dallas-based George W. Bush Presidential Center to fund an initiative aimed at helping U.S. military veterans transition into civilian life.

Boeing got off to a rocky start with Trump, who criticized the company on the 2016 campaign trail for building a factory in China. He also said the company shared its intellectual property with the Chinese government to secure business there.

Inaugural Donation

After his White House win, Trump said he wanted to cancel the \$4 billion contract Boeing had to develop future versions of Air Force One, the specialized aircraft that flies U.S. presidents around the globe. Boeing swung into action. Chief Executive Officer Dennis Muilenburg called the president-elect and secured a meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort to discuss the contract. Boeing also made a \$1 million contribution to Trump's inaugural committee, as it did for Obama's festivities in 2013.

In February 2017, Trump visited Boeing's South Carolina plant and called its 787-10 Dreamliner long haul jet "an amazing piece of art." Just over a year later, the White House announced it had reached a deal with Boeing for two copies of the presidential airplane -- customized versions of the 747-8 aircraft -- at a cost of \$3.9 billion.

[State progressives want Heastie to act on campaign finance now](#)

Progressive lawmakers called on Democratic leaders Wednesday to stop stalling on taxpayer-funded campaign financing.

"We need big money out, and small donors in," said state Sen. Zellnor Myrie (D-Brooklyn), chair of the Senate Elections Committee.

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie said he doesn't have the votes to pass the measure, even though in past years the legislation has had support.

He told reporters Wednesday his members still have "a lot of open questions."

"I'd say some of the bigger concerns are we still have...independent expenditures, how do you account for that?" he said.

"How do you account for, you know, type of spending, what should the match be? What do you do with...should matches outside the state?"

But progressive groups who were key supporters of Democrats in the 2018 election cycle threatened to withdraw their support to lawmakers backsliding on campaign finance.

"It's hard to believe anything, other than concerns that they'd be primaried," said Ricky Silver, co-lead organizer for Empire State Indivisible — a progressive group that backed challengers in the 2018 election cycle.

"It's totally disingenuous," he added. "We'd have to rethink who we support."

Gov. Andrew Cuomo included legislation in his budget for campaign financing but conceded, “It is...controversial.”

But opponents [argue the system will drain campaign dollars](#) to pay for any number of candidates’ pipe dream political crusades.

Other groups like TrueBlueNY have targeted individual lawmakers, like Assemblyman Marcos Crespo (D-Bronx), on Twitter.

“Hi @MarcosCrespo85! You voted in favor of the ‘2014 Fair Elections Act.’ Do you support a 6-1 public match in the 2019 budget? YES or NO?” [reads the tweet.](#)

“...FUN FACT: In 2018, he raised almost \$400K: \$45k from out of state, \$32k from lawyers & lobbyists, & \$69k from finance, insurance & RE.”