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[Disney World offers Florida politicians a sneak peek at Star Wars attraction, spawning ethics questions](#)

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Florida politicians are getting special access to a galaxy far, far away this Friday, but an ethics watchdog and even some lawmakers have a bad feeling about this.

Walt Disney World invited state legislators and other officeholders to a “community leader preview” for its highly anticipated Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge attraction. It’s the hottest ticket in town not yet available to the general public.

The event at Disney’s Hollywood Studios isn’t free, with invitees needing to have RSVP’d by Aug. 7 and pay \$170, plus \$25 parking, to attend the three-hour preview.

Once inside, guests can “experience your own Star Wars adventure in Black Spire Outpost on the planet Batuu, where you’ll have a chance to fly the Millennium Falcon, take a swig of Blue Milk, discover galactic treasures and much more,” according to the invitation.

State ethics laws are strict about what public officials and employees can accept, stating they can’t “solicit or accept anything of value to the recipient, including a gift, loan, reward, promise of future employment, favor, or service, based upon any understanding that [their] vote, official action, or judgment ... would be influenced thereby.”

Although officials will have to pay to attend, the event is still providing a glimpse at an attraction only available right now to “platinum” Disney annual pass holders in advance of the Aug. 29 grand opening.

Disney, the biggest corporation in Florida, spent \$28 million on state elections during the 2018 cycle. Lawmakers have weighed in on issues ranging from casino gambling – which Disney fiercely opposes – to sales tax exemptions, and even to whether the company still has the 1960s-granted right to build a nuclear power plant.

County and city officials also deal with Disney on a regular basis.

Ben Wilcox, research director of the watchdog group Integrity Florida, was “queasy” about the event, saying it “violates the spirit [of the law], if not the law.”

“It may technically be legal, and it may not constitute a ‘gift’ that they would not be able to accept, but it raises questions,” Wilcox said. “Will lobbyists and corporate officials have access and influence at this event with legislators and elected officials? I think people are right to look at the appearance of what this event is and take that into consideration.”

Florida residents, he said, “don’t like public officials not just getting gifts, but [getting] special treatment, special benefits that otherwise aren’t available to most of the general public.”

Orlando City Commissioner Patty Sheehan was among the politicians who declined to attend.

“I decided not to go because it would not be fair to people who would not have the opportunity,” Sheehan said in an email.

Disney spokeswoman Jacquee Wahler said Galaxy’s Edge “is a \$1 billion project that created over 7,000 jobs in our state. Elected officials are under no obligation [to come], though if they choose to, we clearly outline the cost and ensure those with ethics restrictions follow the law.”

Prior to opening a new attraction, Wahler said, “it’s important for local and state leaders to become familiar with our product and the economic impact of our investment in Florida.”

The Legislature

Exactly how many people were invited to the event is unclear. The Orlando Sentinel asked every state legislator whether they had received the invitation, and while several of Disney’s nearby Central Florida lawmakers did, others didn’t.

Among those who responded to the Sentinel, state Reps. Anna Eskamani, D-Orlando, Carlos Guillermo Smith, D-Orlando, Joy Goff-Marcil, D-Maitland, Geraldine Thompson, D-Winter Garden, and state Sen. Linda Stewart, D-Orlando – all from Disney’s home base of Orange County – got invitations but declined to go. But so did state Sen. Jason Pizzo, D-Miami, and state Reps. Wyman Duggan, R-Jacksonville, and Toby Overdorf, R-Palm City, all based far from Orlando.

State Rep. Anthony Sabatini, R-Howey-in-the-Hills, state Sen. and GOP chair Joe Gruters, R-Sarasota, Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bartow, and state Sen. Annette Taddeo, D-Miami, all said they didn’t get invites.

State Sen. Kelli Stargel, R-Lakeland, was the only state legislator to say she was definitely going. “FYI, I did buy two tickets and no taxpayer dollars will be spent on this event,” Stargell said in an email. “One of my assistants, who has had a second job at Disney for over a decade, had the opportunity to attend with employees last week and said it’s a wonderful attraction. I’m looking forward to attending.”

Thompson said she would be out of town on Friday, but said she saw no issue with anyone attending.

“There’s a cost to attend, which would mean ethics laws wouldn’t be violated,” Thompson said.

But other lawmakers said from their point of view, the offer was concerning.

Eskamani acknowledged she is “a HUGE Star Wars fan,” she said via text. “Han Solo was actually my first crush.”

But, she added, “I understand the impact tourism has on our economy – I don’t need a sneak peek or ‘behind the scenes’ tour to know that. ... I have invited Disney to meet with us at our legislative office if they ever wish to discuss their legislative priorities with us, but as we saw during the 2019 session, it seems Disney would rather toss their priorities into other bills.”

Sabatini and Pizzo said they often take tours of institutions or businesses when it’s helpful, but Pizzo said his office has “a very strict rule about accepting anything of value, and we don’t attend events unless we pay full price for entry/tickets.”

Orange County

Among local officials, Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer and Comptroller Phil Diamond said they would be attending the preview. Disney has contributed \$45,000 to a political action committee tied to Dyer's re-election campaign, state records show.

Cassandra Lafser, a spokeswoman for Dyer, said the city's legal office reviewed it and found no conflicts with its ethics policy. The mayor will be reporting it as a gift, she said.

Dyer and Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings have already seen Galaxy's Edge, previewing it with kids from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Florida, according to tweets from Demings' account. Demings could not be reached for comment.

Others, like Orange County Commissioners Maribel Gomez Cordero and Betsy VanderLey, as well as Tax Collector Scott Randolph and Property Appraiser Rick Singh, said they weren't invited.

Singh has frequently sparred in courtrooms with the region's theme parks in property valuation disputes. He is being sued by Disney World over assessments of Magic Kingdom, Epcot and hotels.

Diamond said his office collects the tourist development tax, so he wanted to be familiar with the attraction he called the biggest opening since Harry Potter at Universal.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it was [ethical]," Diamond said.

Orlando commissioners Jim Gray, Sam Ings, and Sheehan all said they were invited but declined. Orange County Commissioner Mayra Uribe also turned down the invitation, her office said.

As for Congress members, spokespersons for U.S. Reps. Michael Waltz, R-St. Augustine, and Val Demings, D-Orlando, said they weren't invited. But U.S. Rep. Stephanie Murphy, D-Orlando, was.

Murphy's office initially said she would be attending but later said she had family obligations and wouldn't make it.

Among all lawmakers, state Sen. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart, may have had the best excuse not to go – her invitation went into the spam filter, her spokeswoman said.

[Top North Dakota officials unfazed by state money awarded to ethics commissioner's tribal college](#)

North Dakota's governor and Senate leaders were unfazed Tuesday that one of their picks for the state's new ethics commission leads a tribal college that has received more than \$2 million in state grants in recent years, which one longtime lawmaker argued is a conflict of interest.

Cynthia Lindquist, president of the Cankdeska Cikana Community College in Fort Totten was selected as one of five members of the voter-approved ethics commission last week. Voters created the commission last year through a constitutional amendment that allows the panel to write rules on transparency, corruption, elections and lobbying as well as investigate wrongdoing.

Gov. Doug Burgum's spokesman Mike Nowatzki said Tuesday the governor's office was aware that the tribal college had received state dollars but noted it's primarily federally funded.

"The committee was confident in her ability to serve on this commission," Nowatzki said.

The three-member selection committee considered potential conflicts of interest during its deliberations, and it eliminated one candidate because his business rents space from Lt. Gov. Brent Sanford. The constitutional amendment bars lobbyists, political party officials and public officeholders from being a member of the commission.

Rep. Bob Martinson, R-Bismarck, a member of the House's budget-writing committee, said it isn't "proper" for Lindquist to be on the commission while she's "directly connected" to state funding appropriated by lawmakers who will be subject to ethics rules.

"I think it puts everybody in a difficult position," he said. "How do we handle tribal funding next session?"

The college received almost \$2.1 million in workforce development grants from the state Department of Commerce during the 2013-15 and 2015-17 budget cycles, according to North Dakota Legislative Council. It also received about \$176,000 in North Dakota University System grants during the past four years for nonbeneficiary students — North Dakota residents who aren't enrolled tribal members or the child of an enrolled member.

Lindquist said the nonbeneficiary student funding is the only direct state money the college currently receives. In her application to the ethics commission, Lindquist said the college has an average enrollment of about 200 students and an annual operating budget of about \$12 million.

Lindquist said she didn't foresee any conflicts with her role on the ethics commission, noting they receive a relatively small sum of money from the state.

Senate Majority Leader Rich Wardner, R-Dickinson, also didn't see Lindquist's role as a conflict. Senate Minority Leader Joan Heckaman, D-New Rockford, called Lindquist "fair in everything she does."

"It's not an issue for me," she said. "I think if you start looking at conflicts between anybody and everybody in the state of North Dakota, we're going to find something."

The commission hasn't yet announced a date for its first meeting.

[Whitmer wants answers on millions in grants paid to trucking industry lobbyist](#)

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said Monday she's looking into millions of dollars in vehicle registration fees the state has paid to an arm of the Michigan Trucking Association and she's not sure she will vote to approve the grant when it comes before the State Administrative Board on Tuesday.

"I'm going to be sitting down with my team this afternoon to talk about that," Whitmer told the Free Press on Monday after inspecting a Lansing bridge that needs \$3 million in urgent repairs.

Whitmer says Michigan needs about \$2 billion a year more in road repair money, but the roughly \$8 million in heavy truck registration fees that has been paid in grants to an arm of the trucking industry's Lansing-based lobbyist since 2012 "could have helped a little bit."

She said she has asked the heads of the Michigan Department of Transportation and the Michigan State Police — whose office of Highway Safety Planning administers the grant — to "look into that and get some answers."

[The Free Press reported Monday](#) that the Lansing-based lobbying organization for the trucking industry has a nonprofit arm that receives an annual grant — paid for from truck registration fees — to educate truckers and the general public about truck safety.

Money from vehicle registration fees normally goes to fix the roads, but 1988 legislation redirected \$15 from each heavy truck registration fee, plus some business fees paid by firms operating interstate trucks, to a Michigan Truck Safety Fund, which supports the grants.

The latest no-bid award to the Michigan Trucking Association — \$1.1 million for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1 — is set for final approval at a Tuesday meeting of the State Administrative Board. The board awards significant contracts for the state and the governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general, treasurer, superintendent of public instruction and transportation director are all voting members.

Grants are awarded by a majority vote.

Among the Free Press findings:

- The Center for Truck Safety, which receives the annual grant, shares Lansing office space and has also shared employees with the trucking association, according to federal tax filings. The center uses some of the state grant money to pay the Michigan Trucking Association more than \$51,000 a year in rent, up to \$20,000 a year for services such as legal advice and personnel management, and \$16,800 in annual interest payments on a loan, according to the filings and other state records.
- The state continues to fund the Michigan Center for Truck Safety despite a 2013 finding by the Office of Highway Safety Planning that the center was reimbursed by the state for close to \$300,000 in impermissible costs over a two-year period.
- A monitoring report — less invasive than an audit — found that the person the center hired to answer a truck safety "hotline" funded by the grant was doubling as the telephone receptionist for the Michigan Trucking Association, said Michael Prince, director of the Office of Highway Safety Planning.
- The report also found that while expenses for certain programs — such as advanced truck driver training on a "skid pad" that simulates hazardous road conditions — were being charged to the Michigan Center for Truck Safety through the grant, revenues from those programs, such as tuition paid by truck drivers, were going to the Michigan Trucking Association, Prince said. The revenues should have stayed with the center to offset its expenses, he said.
- The report also found that equipment worth more than \$13,000, paid for with state funds, was sold to pay off a trucking association debt for equipment storage, according to state records.
- The commission has in the past called for proposals from other groups to seek the grant money to handle the education efforts, but officials said it has been rare for any other group to bid on the work.
- The most recent request for proposals, issued in 2016, contained an unusual requirement. It said: "Current personnel involved with the Truck Driver Safety Education project will remain on staff." In other words, any proposal to compete with the Michigan Center for Truck Safety had to be built around using all of the center's existing staff. Officials agreed that could discourage other organizations from bidding on the grant.

Lansing Mayor Andy Schor said the bridge Whitmer inspected Tuesday, which crosses the Red Cedar River on Elm Street, is under load restrictions because of its poor condition, needing \$3 million in repairs.

Schor said it is one of several Lansing bridges in critical need of repair. The city is allowed to request state funding for five bridges each year, and always does so, but only receives funding for one or two because of a lack of available repair funds, he said.

Lobbyist for U.S. Soccer reached out to Dem presidential candidates

A lobbyist for the U.S. Soccer Federation reached out to at least five Democratic presidential campaigns ahead of their primary debate last month to argue that the women's national team isn't paid less than the men's team.

The soccer organization has been fighting a highly publicized lawsuit brought by the World Cup-winning women's team, and the federation apparently believed the players' claims of being underpaid might become an issue in the Democratic debate, emails obtained by POLITICO show.

"Given the high profile nature of this issue, and the fact that it could come up during the debate, the U.S. Soccer Federation wants to be sure all of the candidates have access to all available information," Ray Bucheger, a lobbyist hired by U.S. Soccer, wrote in an email to one of the campaigns late last month.

Bucheger also sent to several campaigns a presentation U.S. Soccer has circulated on Capitol Hill in recent weeks as part of a lobbying campaign to push back against the women's pay claims. Bucheger and another lobbyist, along with U.S. Soccer's general counsel, Lydia Wahlke, have met with staffers for lawmakers who have introduced legislation designed to force U.S. Soccer to pay the women's and men's teams equally.

Staffers for five presidential campaigns contacted by U.S. Soccer shared details of Bucheger's outreach on the condition that POLITICO not identify which candidates they worked for. U.S. Soccer declined to answer questions about Bucheger's efforts to reach the campaigns. Bucheger didn't respond to a request for comment.

It's unclear how many campaigns were approached. POLITICO reached out to the campaigns of all 20 Democrats who participated in the debate last month. Several said they weren't aware of any outreach from Bucheger, and others did not respond to requests for comment.

Patricia Ewing, a spokeswoman for Marianne Williamson's campaign, said no one from U.S. Soccer had reached out ahead of the debate.

"If they had, Marianne Williamson would have told U.S. Soccer to pay the women more than the men, since it is the women that are world champions," she wrote in an email to POLITICO.

In the lawsuit the women's team filed against U.S. Soccer in March, they argued, among other things, that under a previous contract, a player on the women's team could have earned in a year as little as 38 percent of what a men's team player made.

U.S. Soccer has hired two Washington lobbying firms, FBB Federal Relations and Van Ness Feldman, to push back against those claims. The lobbyists they've hired have met with staffers for lawmakers who introduced equal-pay legislation, including Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Rep. Doris Matsui (D-Calif.), both of whom have cited the 38 percent statistic in pushing for pay equity.

The presentation given to congressional staffers and sent to presidential campaigns emphasizes the benefits the female players receive — including a guaranteed salary, maternity leave, a nanny subsidy, injury protection, health benefits, and retirement perks — that the male players do not. It also states that the women were paid nearly five times as much as the men last year, earning \$275,478 in average cash compensation per player, compared with \$57,283 for the men's team. Both teams have criticized those numbers as misleading.

Comparing how the women's and men's teams are paid is tricky because they play different numbers of games each year and their compensation is structured differently. Molly Levinson, a spokeswoman for the women's team players in their lawsuit, said the presentation Bucheger sent to the campaigns contained "inflated and cherry-picked numbers."

"Imagine the proudest time of your life was putting on a USA jersey, working harder than ever, winning the World Cup," Levinson said in a statement Friday. "Then imagine coming home to find that [U.S. Soccer], your employer, the organization whose stated purpose is to promote and support you, has had hidden meetings with lawmakers to diminish and undervalue you."

Neil Buethe, a U.S. Soccer spokesman, said the organization was trying to provide accurate information about how the women's team is compensated.

"There was a dearth of information publicly available about U.S. Soccer and its role in supporting women's soccer; an information gap we were asked by several Members of Congress and others to fill," Buethe wrote in an email to POLITICO. "We are 100 percent supportive of the Women's National Team and have done more than any organization in the country, and perhaps the world, to invest in and build the girls and women's teams."

U.S. Soccer might not have needed to worry about the debate. Only one candidate — Sen. Kamala Harris of California — talked about the pay gap between men and women during the two-night event in Detroit, but she didn't mention the women's team.

"Since 1963, when we passed the Equal Pay Act, we have been talking about the fact women are not paid equally for equal work," Harris said. "Fast forward to the year of our Lord 2019 and women are paid 80 cents on the dollar, black women 61 cents, Native American women 58 cents, Latinas 53 cents."

Harris proposed requiring corporations to make public whether they're paying women equally and fining them 1 percent of their profits for every percentage point of difference between what they pay men and women.

"That will get everybody's attention," she said.

A senior adviser to one of the campaigns contacted by Bucheger who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to talk with reporters said the lobbying efforts had no effect on the campaign's debate preparations.

"Whoever does their lobbying and PR should be fired, and the money should go to the players," the adviser said.