



[City Council Approves Ban On Aldermen Lobbying Other Elected Officials](#)

With the feds investigating lobbying practices at energy giant ComEd, and also raiding the offices of several local and state officials across the state in recent months, the Chicago City Council on Wednesday banned aldermen from working as paid lobbyists, and barred other elected officials from lobbying the city.

Without debate, aldermen approved an ordinance that would prohibit all city elected officials and employees from being paid by a private client to lobby any government body in Illinois, at either the state, county, or municipal level. Likewise, it would prevent any other elected officials in Illinois from being paid to lobby the City Council, or any city department or agency on behalf of a private client.

The measure was sponsored by Ald. Michele Smith (43rd), who chairs the council's Ethics Committee, and Ald. Matthew O'Shea (19th).

At [a committee hearing on the ordinance](#) earlier this month, O'Shea called the lobbying ban "commonsense legislation" to prevent what he said is a far too common problem of elected officials profiting from interests that conflict with their government duties.

"How many times do we have to wake up and read the newspaper and see something else?" he said. "We need to send the message to the people that we represent in our communities that the buck stops here, and the bullshit's gonna stop."

However, some aldermen have raised concerns that the ban would hurt some professional lobbyists who also serve as elected officials in small towns out of a sense of civic duty.

"When we say all elected officials, I think we're throwing the baby out with the bathwater on this one," Ald. David Moore (17th) said. "We have to make sure that this is written well, that it does not affect those good elected officials who are doing good work in the city, state, and county."

However, Ald. Michele Smith (43rd) pointed out that virtually every regulation the city has ever put into place has had an adverse impact on people who weren't regulated before. She said the ban is necessary to avoid conflicts of interest for city officials, even if it might hurt some lobbyists.

"It isn't because it's fashionable, it isn't because it's popular, it's because it's needed," she said.

Chicago Ethics Board executive director Steve Berlin explained that the lobbying ban would not prevent any elected official from lobbying on behalf of their constituents, or from performing their official government duties.

Lawyers seeking city action on zoning matters would be exempt from the ban.

The lobbying ban is a clear response to a sweeping federal government investigation of ComEd and parent company Exelon and their lobbying practices. The lobbying ban also was prompted by federal charges filed against state Rep. Luis Arroyo, who is accused of bribing a state senator in exchange for the senator's support of sweepstakes-related legislation that would benefit one of Arroyo's lobbying clients.

Several aldermen also have fallen under the federal microscope in the past year. Ald. Edward Burke (14th) has been indicted on bribery charges, and was forced to give up his seat as powerful chairman of the Finance Committee. Former Ald. Danny Solis did not run for re-election this year after it became public that he had worn a wire for the feds, recording conversations with colleagues including Burke for two years. And federal agents raided Ald. Carrie Austin's ward office earlier this year, seizing printed documents as well as computers and electronic files. Austin and Solis have not been charged with any crimes, however.

In other business on Wednesday, Ald. Raymond Lopez delayed a final vote on [a proposed \\$1.2 million settlement](#) with the family of 26-year-old Heriberto Godinez, who died during a burglary arrest in 2015.

Godinez's family accused officers of misconduct and excessive force during the arrest on the night of July 20, 2015.

Dashcam video made headlines at the time of the incident. It showed Godinez thrashing about as he was handcuffed, and also showed a Chicago Police officer place his foot on Godinez's neck while arresting him and then shifting his weight. First Assistant Corporation Counsel Renai Rodney told aldermen earlier this week that video also showed another officer standing on Godinez's chest for about 90 seconds.

The Cook County Medical Examiner's office said an autopsy determined Godinez died from cocaine and alcohol poisoning. A second autopsy requested by Cook County prosecutors also blamed Godinez's death on a cocaine overdose, but a third autopsy commissioned by his family blamed his death on asphyxia, pointing to abrasions on his neck, and damage to his carotid arteries.

Lopez has argued that approving a settlement with the Godinez family would essentially be signing off on a "hush money" over the death of a "coke-fueled" gang-banger.

Also on Wednesday, Ald. Tom Tunney (44th) held back a final vote on [a zoning change sought by a medical marijuana firm](#) hoping to move from Lakeview to a larger facility in Wrigleyville. Cresco Labs, owners of MedMar Lakeview, are seeking to build a new dispensary at 3524 N. Clark St. so it can expand its current operations.

Tunney said he wanted to wait on final approval of that zoning change while aldermen were debating an ordinance that would have delayed recreational pot sales in Chicago by six months.

"What we wanted to do is to see where the argument was going today," he said.

Now that the proposed delay in recreational sales has been defeated, Tunney said he'll call for a vote on MedMar Lakeview's zoning change in January.

[Nielsen guitar pick promoted lobbying firm website](#)

The guitar picks that rock star Rick Nielsen distributed to lawmakers [on the floor of the House and Senate](#) this year directed them to visit a website that is linked to a lobbying firm.

Nielsen, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame musician from the band Cheap Trick, visited the statehouse in May to support the push for a Rockford casino. Nielsen's wife is listed as an investor in the Hard Rock casino proposal that the city of Rockford approved.

Despite Nielsen's personal profit motives in the Rockford casino, he never registered as a lobbyist. The Illinois Secretary of State's office, which is charged with enforcing the lobbying rules, confirmed the [Inspector General is investigating](#) to find out why Nielsen failed to register as a lobbyist.

Senator Dave Syverson (R-Rockford) brought Nielsen onto the Senate floor as his guest, and argues that Nielsen, his business partner, was advocating on behalf of his hometown, not lobbying for a specific legislative outcome.

However, the materials Nielsen distributed on the floor of the Senate do, in fact, have ties to a lobbying firm that was previously worked in Illinois.

According to internet registration records, the website “TimeForRockford.com” was set up on April 24th, mere weeks before lawmakers would cast a pivotal vote to approve the Rockford casino. The website address, which appeared on the guitar picks Mr. Nielsen distributed, has since been taken offline, but internet archives link the site to ClearAdvocacy.com, a partner of Res Publica Group which works in Illinois and California.

Guy Chipparoni, President and CEO of Res Publica Group, has long ties to Illinois politics. His firm Res Publica Group registered to lobby Illinois lawmakers from 2003 through 2014, according to records filed at the Secretary of State’s office. Chipparoni was listed as the company’s exclusive lobbyist from 2006 through 2014. His only client in recent years was the Wirtz Corporation, the beverage company owned by Blackhawks owner Rocky Wirtz.

Records filed in 2010 show Chipparoni, who previously served as a senior adviser for former Republican Governor Jim Edgar, lobbied state lawmakers on matters related to “racing and wagering.”

Today, Chipparoni remains involved in the Hard Rock casino project, even after the successful lobbying attempt to persuade Illinois lawmakers to approve a casino license in Rockford are over. Last week, Chipparoni fielded questions that were emailed to Ian Linnabary, a Reno Zahm attorney who represented the Hard Rock casino investors to the City of Rockford.

Chipparoni inquired about the nature of the story so he could relay the information back to Linnabary. When he learned the questions centered around Linnabary and Syverson’s public campaign to award the city’s casino certification to a group of investors that included [Syverson’s business partners and campaign donors](#), Chipparoni responded, “That’s not news in Illinois.”

The Illinois Gaming Board is currently reviewing the Hard Rock proposal. The city of Rockford reviewed applications from two other developer groups, but ultimately agreed with Linnabary, Hard Rock’s lawyer, and Republican state Senator Dave Syverson, Nielsen’s business partner, and rejected the proposals from the competing groups.

[Court: Washington state lawmakers subject to records act](#)

The Washington Supreme Court ruled Thursday that state lawmakers are subject to the same public disclosure rules that apply to other elected officials and agencies.

In a 7-2 ruling, justices rejected lawmakers' assertion that they are not required to turn over daily schedules, emails, text messages and other materials related to their work.

The justices heard arguments in June on the appeal of a case that was sparked by a September 2017 lawsuit filed by a media coalition led by The Associated Press. It sought sexual harassment reports, calendar entries and other documents.

Lawmakers have long said they are not subject to the law that applies to officials across the state, from school board members and county commissioners to agency heads.

Michele Earl-Hubbard, the attorney for the media coalition, called the ruling a "huge win."

"We have been hitting a brick wall for more than a decade where lawmakers have been arguing that somehow different rules applied to them," she said. "We have now proven that's not true. It was never true."

The Supreme Court affirmed a Thurston County superior court judge's ruling in January 2018 that found while the offices of individual lawmakers are subject to the Public Records Act, the House and Senate as a whole are not. The Legislature appealed the portion of the ruling that applies to the legislative offices, and the media outlets appealed the part that applies to the House and Senate.

Following the 2018 decision, lawmakers quickly passed a bill that retroactively exempted them from the law but would have allowed for more limited legislative disclosure for things like daily calendars and correspondence with lobbyists. After a public outcry, Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee vetoed the measure.

While the media won its argument that individual lawmakers must release records, a majority of the Supreme Court justices agreed with the superior court that the disclosure law applies to the entities of the House and the Senate, through the House clerk and secretary of the Senate, in a much more limited way.

The Legislature has made a series of changes to the law, and lawyers for the House and Senate have regularly cited a 1995 revision to a 1971 definition of legislative records in their denials. The

House and Senate currently release limited records, including travel, and payroll records and reports to the Legislature.

Attorneys for the Legislature had argued that changes in 2005 and 2007 — when the public-records act's language and definitions were incorporated into a statute separate from the campaign-finance portions of the original initiative — definitively removed lawmakers from disclosure requirements.

The Legislature, which normally would be represented by the attorney general's office, chose instead to use two private law firms, paying about \$350,000.

The attorney general's office filed a brief before the high court stating that each lawmaker is fully subject to the public disclosure law, but that the House and Senate are subject in a more limited manner. They said the law specifically defines which records must be made available for release by the House and Senate.

In a statement issued after the ruling, House Speaker-designate Laurie Jenkins said that her caucus was still reviewing the decision but believes "in open and accountable government."

"While we have already taken action toward better access to public records, we have more work to do," she wrote.

Twenty news and open government groups signed on to three briefs in support of the media coalition, including the Washington Coalition for Open Government, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, Reporters Without Borders and the Society of Professional Journalists.

Besides AP, the groups involved in the lawsuit are: public radio's Northwest News Network, KING-TV, KIRO 7, Allied Daily Newspapers of Washington, The Spokesman-Review, the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, Sound Publishing, Tacoma News Inc. and The Seattle Times.

The case now heads back to the lower court for further proceedings, including determination of potential penalties and fees.

[State Rep. Michael Grieco to face 'formal complaint' from Florida Bar over fundraising scandal](#)

State Rep. Michael Grieco has already been [charged](#) with a crime and is [battling](#) civil sanctions over a fundraising scandal during his failed run for Miami Beach mayor.

Now Grieco, a criminal defense attorney, could face professional repercussions from the Florida Bar as well.

In a notice issued to Grieco earlier this month, the Bar said it had found “probable cause to prepare a formal complaint” against the Democrat, who pleaded no contest in 2017 to a misdemeanor charge that a political committee that he was secretly running accepted \$25,000 worth of foreign money funneled through a straw donor.

The notice said the complaint will be based on violations of three rules. The rules cited in the notice prohibit lawyers from committing crimes that reflect “adversely on the lawyer’s honesty, trustworthiness, or fitness as a lawyer” and from engaging in misconduct “involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation.”

Leslie Smith, senior communications director for the Bar, said there was “no specific timeline” for the formal complaint to be filed. The Bar is the arm of the Florida Supreme Court charged with lawyer regulation. Based on the Bar’s charges of rule violations, The Florida Supreme Court can discipline, suspend and expel attorneys who commit crimes or violate Bar rules.

Grieco and his attorney Ben Kuehne did not respond to requests for comment Friday.

Even as Grieco continues to deal with blowback from the 2017 controversy — which also led to county ethics charges that he lied to the public about his association with the political action committee People for Better Leaders — high-profile Democrats are standing by him.

Grieco is holding a Jan. 8 fundraiser hosted by state Sen. Jason Pizzo, state Sen. José Javier Rodríguez, and state Reps. Nick Duran and Javier Fernandez, among other local leaders. Pizzo, when asked why he was comfortable supporting Grieco, wrote in a text message that Grieco “was duly elected, has filed bills to improve the quality of life for everyone, and works very hard.” Fernandez said Grieco has proven himself as a capable lawmaker.

“Whatever issues Michael had, the voters of his district were able to look past them, and so am I,” Duran told the Miami Herald. “He has been an excellent legislator who has proven to be a strong voice on issues that impact our county and community.”

The fundraiser also signals a surprising reconciliation between Grieco and a one-time opponent, Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber, who told voters during the 2017 mayoral campaign that Grieco was “violating the law and lying to you about the facts.” Gelber, a former federal corruption prosecutor, later said in a campaign video that Grieco’s “behavior has no place in our city.”

In an interview Friday, Gelber declined to discuss the 2017 campaign, saying “I’m not in the business of judging.” He said he’s not raising money for Grieco but is simply endorsing the reelection campaign of Miami Beach’s Democratic state representative.

“That’s all history for me and when he called me I agreed immediately [to support him],” said Gelber, himself a former Democratic state representative. “I want him to be successful.”

Grieco’s brush with the Bar is not his first. In 2008, Grieco received a [public reprimand](#) by the Florida Supreme Court for his conduct as an assistant state attorney. The Bar charged that Grieco had interfered in the assault case of a friend. He was not involved with the case but led detectives to believe he was and later asked that his friend receive special treatment, according to the Bar.

‘LOOK RIGHT INTO MY SOUL’

Grieco’s most recent troubles began when he launched a campaign for Miami Beach Mayor in 2017.

The Beach has strict campaign-finance rules that prohibit candidates and officials from soliciting city vendors, lobbyists and certain developers for contributions to political action committees. But Grieco, then a popular beach commissioner, took a back road, asking a personal friend to set up a committee called People for Better Leaders. He subsequently began secretly raising money for the committee. The Herald revealed his activities in a series of articles over the summer of 2017. Grieco steadfastly denied any wrongdoing, saying he had nothing to do with the committee. “You can look right into my soul,” he [told](#) reporters.

Nonetheless, Grieco was the man behind the curtain, calling potential donors for cash and [even meeting them in parking garages to accept checks](#). The donors included the kinds of special interests that he often railed against on the campaign trail. Facing a growing investigation from the state attorney’s office, Grieco [dropped out](#) of the race for mayor in July 2017 and announced he would instead seek to keep his seat on the commission.

It wasn’t enough.

In the fall, state prosecutors charged Grieco with a misdemeanor criminal violation of Florida’s campaign-finance laws. They said the commissioner had accepted a \$25,000 contribution from a South Florida Realtor when he knew the funds actually came from a wealthy Norwegian

investor. Foreign nationals are not allowed to contribute to U.S. elections and donors are prohibited from making contributions in someone else's name.

Emails obtained by the Herald show Grieco even [offered instructions](#) on how to route the money through the banking system.

“It is sad to see a young public servant tumble but there are no special exceptions to Florida’s elections laws,” Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle, Grieco’s former boss, said in a statement after the charges were announced. “Masking the source of a campaign donation is not only illegal but denigrates the importance of transparency. Our citizens deserve better from all of those who seek public office.”

But prosecutors allowed Grieco to plead no contest, meaning he did not admit guilt. He resigned from the commission and was sentenced to a year of probation during which he could not run for public office. Thanks to his plea deal, Grieco was allowed to terminate his probation within six months. He soon announced he would [run](#) as a Democrat for the Florida House’s District 113 seat, his first attempt at state office.

After he declared his candidacy, the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics & Public Trust [charged](#) Grieco with two counts of “knowingly furnish[ing] false information on any public matter.” The commission also said Grieco broke a Miami Beach ethics ordinance against soliciting city vendors for campaign funds.

In the end, the allegations didn’t seem to matter much. Grieco handily won both the 2018 primary and general election in the safely Democratic district.

In addition to the Bar complaint, the county ethics case is still ongoing. A public hearing is expected to take place after the next legislative session. Grieco is fighting the case. His attorney had sought to exclude as evidence Herald articles in which he made false statements, but commissioners rejected the motion at a December meeting.

Since being elected to Tallahassee, Grieco has continued his criminal defense work. He recently appeared in federal court representing Jesús Menocal Jr., a former Hialeah cop accused of using his badge to pressure women and girls into sex. With Grieco at his side, Menocal [pleaded](#) not guilty.

[**Lobbying by incoming Georgia senator’s firm under scrutiny**](#)

Before Republican Kelly Loeffler emerged as Gov. Brian Kemp's pick for a U.S. Senate seat, the powerful financial firm where she's long served as a senior executive spent millions of dollars to lobby the congressional lawmakers she'll soon join and the government agencies she'll soon influence.

An Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis of financial disclosures showed that Intercontinental Exchange, the Atlanta-based financial platform, has spent more than \$17 million lobbying Congress and federal agencies since 2002.

The records from the [Center for Responsive Politics](#) show that Intercontinental Exchange's lobbying has put it [among](#) the 25 top-spending securities and investment firms since 2011. The company has also hired a team of advocates, including a former U.S. House staffer who drew a public rebuke from a powerful lawmaker.

Loeffler was a top marketing executive for Intercontinental Exchange, the massive financial trading firm, until 2018 when she became the head of a subsidiary of the company that deals with digital currency, such as bitcoin. Her husband, Jeff Sprecher, is Intercontinental Exchange's top executive.

The lobbying expenses are a small fraction of spending from a company valued at more than \$50 billion, and Loeffler said in an interview that she wasn't involved in the decisions.

Her corporate ties have brought [scrutiny](#) over whether she'll serve on powerful committees that oversee the financial industry or cast votes on issues that could influence her husband's company or its subsidiary, the Bakkt digital currency firm she now runs.

Loeffler told the AJC she would abide by Senate ethics rules and transparency laws, and that she plans to step down from her role in the company and distance herself from its decisions. She would not say whether she would recuse herself from certain votes that could influence the business.

"I have not spent my life trying to get to Washington. I've stepped out of the private sector to serve Georgians out of gratitude to what our state means to me. With regard to any ethics, financial reporting or other requirements, I'm going to do it right," she said.

"I'll adhere to every ethics requirement," she added. "I'll meet the spirit and the letter of every ethics rule and law."

Her lobbying expenditures have drawn the attention of watchdog advocates who have encouraged her to disclose her potential conflicts of interest and be transparent about her financial holdings.

“There are always perception problems in today’s political world when people seeking influence use their dollars, such as those who lobby for business interests, are appointed to government positions or public office,” said William Perry of Georgia Ethics Watchdog.

“Senator Loeffler will have a big challenge proving she represents the average Georgian because of the financial interests that she and her husband represent,” he said.

Loeffler could quickly face a test. Congress could vote next year to reauthorize the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, which regulates financial trading platforms and exchanges.

And she could also soon vote on a new commissioner of the Securities and Exchange Commission, whose lone Democratic member [is set to step down](#). The SEC regulates the New York Stock Exchange, one of the Intercontinental Exchange’s prized assets.

Lobbyist hires

Financial records show Intercontinental Exchange has hired several well-connected lobbyists including [Alex Albert](#), a former top aide to Zell Miller when he was in the U.S. Senate, and Hope Jarkowski, who once worked for the Senate Banking Committee.

The team was led by Peter Roberson, who was for years the vice president of government relations for Intercontinental Exchange. As a staffer with the House Financial Services Committee, Roberson helped craft an overhaul that imposed regulations for the first time on credit derivatives and other opaque financial instruments.

His swift 2010 departure from the House to a senior role at Intercontinental Exchange, a company with an important stake in legislation he helped create, drew a sharp response from then-U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, who was chairman of the finance committee.

Frank, wary of the perception that staffers could land lucrative jobs with hefty salaries from legislation they helped design, banned the committee’s aides from discussing banking policy with Roberson.

“Fortunately, examples of staff members doing what Mr. Roberson has done are rare, but even one example is far too much,” Frank [said at the time](#) about Roberson, who is now an executive with Charles Schwab.“

And that is why I wanted to make clear I share the unhappiness of people at this, and my intention to prohibit any contact between him and members of the staff for as long as I have any control over the matter,” Frank said.

Democrat Matt Lieberman, an Atlanta educator and entrepreneur who is running for the Senate seat in November’s special election, said the lobbying disclosures show Loeffler is “not only part of the rigged system — she literally owns it.”

“But she doesn’t own this Senate seat. The people of Georgia do,” he said. “And it’s Georgians who will decide who they want representing them.”

Loeffler said she was prepared for scrutiny of her personal finances and her company’s decisions.

“I made a decision to serve knowing that these transparency requirements, and the need to resolve any conflicts, would apply from day one,” she said. “I’m spending a lot of time addressing these and taking it very seriously.”

[Amid Sprawling Federal Probe, State Ethics Commission Gets to Work](#)

A new state commission has just over three months – until the end of March – to come up with recommendations on how Illinois can “improve public trust in government.”

It’s a lofty task given that, as [the resolution creating the group put it](#), “the trust of the citizens in their government at all levels has recently been tested.”

A FBI investigation that doesn’t appear to have reached a final conclusion has already led to the resignation of a state senator and a state representative. The resignation of Sen. Martin Sandoval, D-Cicero, is set to take effect in January; his home and offices were raided by the FBI this fall. State Rep. Luis Arroyo, D-Chicago, stepped down in November, a week after he was arrested on a bribery charge.

Arroyo allegedly bribed a sitting senator to advance state legislation on behalf of a gambling client that had hired Arroyo to lobby the city of Chicago.

“Today went well,” commission co-chair Sen. Elgie Sims, D-Chicago, said on Monday after the group’s initial meeting in Chicago. “There was very little partisan rancor. Everybody laid out their positions. We talked honestly about the fact that there’s a problem. We acknowledge that there’s a problem and we want to find solutions. How we get to those solutions, that’s where the differences are going to come in.”

Whether Illinois should continue to permit lawmakers to work simultaneously as lobbyists is one of the changes the Joint Commission on Ethics and Lobbying Reform is apt to consider.

While some states have full-time, professional legislatures, Illinois’ General Assembly is organized as a part-time citizen body, meaning that it’s legal for legislators to have other jobs.

Rep. Dan McConchie, R-Hawthorn Woods, said he appreciates the fact that legislators come to Springfield with the experience and insight of having jobs as varied as dentist, farmer and insurance agent.

“Personally I think it is valuable, and if we’re going to have that, we need to figure out how we are going to try to address the ethical issues that brought us here in a manner that allows people to continue to do that ... as a positive to their legislative work, and not have the opposite: People who join the legislature in order to somehow fatten their personal bottom lines because of their power and political affiliation,” he said. “What’s happened in the past few weeks and months says that we have some shortcomings.”

Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, who also serves as the chairman of the Democratic Party of Illinois, is a well-off property tax attorney at his namesake Chicago law firm, and according to the Chicago Sun-Times was recorded by the FBI on a wiretap worn by former city Ald. Danny Solis, who was serving as a mole for the feds in a case that led to corruption charges against Chicago Ald. Ed Burke.

Senate Republican Leader Bill Brady of Bloomington has come under scrutiny for not openly and explicitly declaring that he’s making a profit from video gambling, even as the legislature debated gambling expansion and video gaming taxes.

Outgoing Sen. President John Cullerton of Chicago and House Republican Leader Jim Durkin of Western Springs also work as attorneys.

Sims, the commission’s co-chair, is listed as a “government relations and public policy lawyer” with the firm Foley & Lardner LLP. He’s listed as a lobbyist with the city of Chicago and Cook

County – two units of local government that require lobbyist registration and that make that information publicly available online.

But other communities don't have the same requirements, and Sims said that's one of the issues the commission should research.

"I could do work in DuPage (County) and other people do lobbying work in DuPage but they don't have to register," Sims said.

Same with Kankakee, Iroquois, McHenry and Lake counties, he said.

That "rules apply and transparency is provided to the public is critical for me," he said. "I want transparency in the process period ... I want to make sure that there's faith in the process."

Sims said "under the guidelines of the commission's charge, I don't think anything's off the table" in terms of ethics.

But that is limited to what's specifically outlined in the resolution that created the commission, which lists the group's duty as reviewing the state government's ethics, lobbyist registration, and Public Officers Prohibited Activities acts as well as procurement, or purchasing, code.

That would not include, Sims said, other issues often connected with governmental ethics and transparency, like campaign finance and the process by which legislative district boundaries are drawn – topics which Republicans appointed to the commission say they may want to consider.

McConchie also said he wants the commission to review any potential areas that are prohibited under federal law but which are not illegal under state law.

The ethics commission is scheduled to next meet in Chicago on Jan. 15.

[New Boeing CEO David Calhoun's political ties raise concerns, experts say](#)

Newly appointed Boeing CEO David Calhoun has been [described](#) as a "turnaround specialist" prepared to help the company gain government approval for its 737 Max, which the manufacturer has sought to put back in the air after two crashes that cost hundreds of lives and forced the cancellation of thousands of flights.

But recent campaign contributions made by Calhoun raise questions about political access he might use to obtain Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) approval for the plane, lobbying experts told Yahoo Finance.

Such influence could undermine the oversight role performed by the FAA, which has faced criticism in the aftermath of the crashes, including a New York Times [report](#) in June that described the agency's failure to independently evaluate the danger of the 737 Max's fatal software, called MCAS, before it approved the plane.

In May, Calhoun gave two donations totaling \$5,600 — the maximum contribution permitted by an individual — to the re-election campaign of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), whose wife Elaine Chao heads the Department of Transportation (DOT), the parent agency of the FAA.

A few months later, in September, Calhoun gave \$10,000 to a committee that seeks to preserve a Republican majority in the Senate, a key goal of McConnell's.

The marital relationship between Chao and McConnell has drawn scrutiny this year after two [Politico reports](#) described priority placed by Chao on transportation projects from McConnell's home state of Kentucky. In October, Democratic Oregon Rep. Peter DeFazio, who chairs the House Transportation Committee, [called](#) on the DOT Inspector General to investigate Chao's potential conflicts of interest.

Since 2017, Calhoun has made some \$64,000 in campaign contributions to Republican candidates and committees. He didn't contribute to any Democratic candidates or committees over that period, according to campaign finance records.

The campaign donations made by Calhoun are “very troubling,” Anthony Nownes, a political science professor at the University of Tennessee and author of “Total Lobbying: What Lobbyists Want (and How They Try to Get It),” told Yahoo Finance.

“Money buys access,” he adds. “That doesn't mean the access necessarily buys policy, but it is most certainly a good start.”

Calhoun — who has headed portfolio operations at Blackstone since 2013 and previously served as chief executive at Nielsen — may have been chosen to run Boeing in part for his potential to influence regulators, Nownes said.

“It strikes me as a pretty smart move by Boeing. There are few people who have as much power over company’s future right now,” Nownes says, in reference to the regulators. “Why not choose someone who has connections to get them in the door at least?”

Adam Newmark, a political science professor at Appalachian State University who studies lobbying, agreed that the contributions raise “legitimate concerns.”

“There’s enough here that doesn’t pass the smell test,” he says. “It doesn’t mean anybody has done anything wrong.”

“There are those who would say that because we don’t have a smoking gun, we shouldn’t ask the questions,” he adds. “That’s flat out wrong.”

Nownes and Newmark both noted that political contributions like Calhoun’s are legal and fairly common among chief executives at major corporations.

In a statement to Yahoo Finance, Boeing said that individuals affiliated with the company contribute to a number of candidates across the political spectrum, and such donations will not undermine the approval process carried out by the FAA.

“Boeing employees and board members give to candidates from both parties who support policies important to our economic and national security,” said Gordon Johndroe, Vice President, Media Relations at Boeing. “We’re confident the FAA and global regulators are engaged in a very robust and rigorous oversight of the Max independent from politics.”

The Department of Transportation, Chao, and McConnell did not respond on the record to a request for comment.

Brian Richter, a professor of public policy at the University of Texas who specializes in campaign finance, said concern about Calhoun’s political access, based on the campaign donations, is “going too far in this case,” since Calhoun likely already established connections with DOT officials over the course of his work in the transportation sector, Richter said.

Calhoun is “probably going to know people throughout the Department of Transportation,” Richter says. “Certainly the Secretary is important but she’s probably not the only decision maker.”

Richter acknowledged that Calhoun’s political ties may have factored into Boeing’s choice to appoint him CEO.

“Calhoun was probably picked, like many CEOs, largely because they do have knowledge of politics or connections into bureaucracies,” Richter says.

Richter also highlighted the significance of McConnell for individuals or groups seeking to influence regulation of the transportation sector.

“It’s not surprising that McConnell would become more strategically important given who his wife is and given that executives can’t make campaign contributions to political appointees,” he says. “It’s the closest way that could happen.”

Boeing has faced a public relations and business crisis since [two crashes](#) involving its 737 Max airplane — one last October off the coast of Indonesia that killed 189 people, and another in March in Ethiopia that killed 157 people. Boeing grounded the planes, then missed deadlines it set for their return to operation, leading to the [cancellation](#) of thousands of flights over a period of months. Last week, the company announced it would halt production of the 737 Max.

On Sunday, Boeing [fired](#) CEO Dennis Muilenburg and named Calhoun as his replacement. Calhoun will take over on Jan. 13.