



M U L T I S T A T E

[Ex-Columbus City Hall lobbyist, Franklin County authority member John Raphael agrees to bribery plea](#) (Ohio)

John Raphael, the former influential [Columbus City Hall lobbyist and one-time political ally](#) to several high-ranking local Democrats, has again agreed to plead guilty to federal corruption charges for billing clients "success fees" that were really intended as bribes in return for securing public contracts, court documents show.

And for the second time since 2016, Raphael is facing prison — this time for up to 20 years — for his role in a bribery and kickback scheme he devised and carried out between 2013 and 2015 as a member of the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority, the public entity that owns Nationwide Arena, the Greater Columbus Convention Center, a high-rise hotel adjacent to the convention center and another hotel currently under construction.

Raphael, 65, of the city's Clintonville neighborhood, is scheduled to be arraigned Wednesday before a federal magistrate in U.S. District Court in Columbus. Court documents show he signed a plea agreement on Dec. 10. He also signed a "statement of facts" on the same day, outlining the scheme to defraud the public of "honest services through bribery and kickbacks and the concealment of material information."

In the court documents reviewed by The Dispatch, Raphael acknowledged that at the same time he was a member of the county facilities authority, he was a paid consultant to a food services company whom he supplied with confidential information that helped it win a business contract with the authority to supply the convention center.

Raphael was paid \$144,000 by the firm, which is not named in the federal plea documents but which other court records have previously revealed as Centerplate, a major food and guest service firm which has contracts with more than 130 convention centers, sports facilities and entertainment venues in North America.

Raphael's contract with Centerplate included a \$40,000 "success fee" that he was owed if the firm ultimately landed the convention center's food contract. The rest of his payments were in the form of nonrefundable consulting fees of \$5,000 a month.

Centerplate was competing for the \$900,000-a-year food services contract at the Greater Columbus Convention Center against three other companies in October 2013 when it hired Raphael as a consultant. By March 2014, court documents state that Raphael was forwarding Centerplate confidential convention center documents, including the evaluation of the incumbent competitor. He did not share them with any other firms.

Raphael later sent his client a confidential draft of the request for proposal (RFP), and a sample contract — 36 minutes after Raphael had received the documents for review as a board member of the facilities authority.

In July 2014, Raphael's client emailed that it had two "concerns" with the RFP and sample contract, and proposed changes that would shift costs to the convention center, court documents state. Two days later Raphael — in his capacity as a facilities authority board member — attended meetings on those contracts, never disclosing that one of the bidders was his client. By September, the RFP and contract document language had changed, with the costs shifted to the public.

'Centerplate wanted to show its appreciation for the contract'

By December, the facilities board had approved the contract with Centerplate, and days later Raphael led a contingent of city officials and their family members on a Centerplate-subsidized junket to Indianapolis to watch the Ohio State Buckeyes football team beat Wisconsin 59-0 in the [Big Ten championship game from the firm's private loge at Lucas Oil Stadium](#), enjoying food and alcohol supplied by the firm.

The [group of city officials](#) included Columbus Mayor Andrew J. Ginther, who at the time was city council president; current City Council President Shannon G. Hardin, who at the time had just been appointed to the council with the backing of then-Mayor Michael B. Coleman, and others.

"Centerplate wanted to show its appreciation for the contract," Raphael told The Dispatch in 2015. But unclear was why Centerplate would want to show these officials its appreciation.

"Nobody on that bus had anything to do with the Centerplate contract," Raphael also told The Dispatch at the time.

The food contract with Centerplate was signed on December 30, 2014. On January 1, 2015, Raphael sent the firm a bill for \$40,000 for the "consulting services success fee," specifying it was for work with the convention center "per contract," and weeks later he had a check for the full amount, court documents say.

Three months later, the firm notified Raphael it no longer needed his services, and executed a 30-day termination notice.

Raphael has agreed to forfeit the entire \$144,000 Centerplate paid him because it was derived illegally, the plea agreement states. He also faces a fine up to double that amount, or \$288,000. Raphael's defense attorney, Roger Sugarman, could not be reached for comment Tuesday afternoon.

John Raphael's criminal cases involving public corruption

In February 2020, The Dispatch reported that Raphael's friend, Rodney L. Myers, who Raphael helped land a job as a \$5,000-a-month consultant for the convention center evaluating the competing food contracts that Centerplate ultimately won, had agreed to plead guilty to bribery and was facing 10 years in prison. Raphael submitted Myers' invoices to the convention center on the letterhead of Raphael's lobbying firm.

Myers provided the firm's vice president with the [Greater Columbus Convention Center's confidential food-service revenue information](#), gave negative evaluations of a competitor and positive evaluations of "Company A," and forwarded those evaluations to the firm he was helping — even incorporating the vice president's feedback and suggestions into his evaluations.

Company A had no contract with Myers, but on Nov. 12, 2014, Myers sent an email demanding payment for the help he had provided, proposing that he be paid between \$20,000 and \$30,000. A month later, he submitted his IRS W-9 form and an invoice for \$17,500 for "consulting services." In January 2015, he submitted a second \$17,500 invoice.

In February 2015, the company wrote a check to Myers for \$17,500. It is unclear whether a second payment was ever made before the scheme started falling apart.

The criminal case involving the convention center contract is [Raphael's second involving public corruption](#).

Raphael already served a 15-month federal sentence starting in mid-2016 for extorting campaign contributions from a Chicago red-light camera firm, Redflex, in a case that court documents

linked to Ginther, former council president Michael C. Mentel, and Coleman, now himself an influential City Hall lobbyist. All three officials have denied involvement in the scheme, and none of them has ever been charged.

In mid-October 2011, Redflex gave Raphael a \$20,000 "success fee," part of a series of payments that the traffic camera company's officials later admitted were intended as bribes, court documents state. A week later, Raphael gave \$20,000 to the Ohio Democratic Party. A few days after that, the state Democratic Party gave \$21,000 to the campaign of Ginther, who at the time was City Council president and Raphael's Clintonville neighbor, living 16 doors away.

Federal court documents also traced a \$5,000 Redflex payment to the Franklin County Democratic Party at the request of Mentel in 2009; and \$5,000 from Raphael to Coleman's campaign account in 2007.

But Raphael said he acted alone in the Redflex case — a contention that both prosecutors and the [judge who sentenced Raphael had previously said they didn't believe](#).

At his June 2016 sentencing, Raphael told U.S. District Judge Michael H. Watson the Redflex scheme stopped with him alone.

"I am not taking one for the team," Raphael said in a statement to the court.

Watson responded that he found the statement curious — and not believable.

"You have chosen not to involve other people," Watson said.

The Centerplate deal wasn't the first time Raphael consulting services had created apparent conflicts of interest.

Starting in 2011, Raphael simultaneously had lobbying contracts with both Kurtz Brothers, a company that had a contract with the Solid Waste Authority of Central Ohio (SWACO) to convert yard waste into mulch, and SWACO itself. The waste authority eventually fired Raphael in late 2013 after a new executive director took over. Kurtz Brothers has said Raphael played no role in negotiating any of its contracts or extensions with SWACO.

'John has reach that I don't with public officials'

The Dispatch reported in August 2020 that Raphael, once considered one of the most-powerful lobbyists at Columbus City Hall, had landed a public consulting job with the village of Obetz just weeks before Columbus officials announced plans to relocate the Crew SC's practice facility from Obetz to Mapfre Stadium.

Obetz finalized a no-bid contract with Raphael on Nov. 15, 2018, paying him \$10,000 for the month of November and \$5,000 a month after that, to represent the village in matters including "retention efforts," a contract states. Rod Davisson, the village's administrator, called the timing of the contract "coincidental at best" because Raphael wasn't hired to help retain the Crew, which was negotiating at the time with Obetz to extend the lease on a practice facility it has used since 1997.

"John has reach that I don't with public officials," Davisson said at the time, adding that Raphael submitted no written invoices or reports detailing his time working as a lobbyist, but instead reported to Davisson weekly by telephone or in person.

The Obetz Village Council never approved Raphael's contract. Davisson said such approval wasn't needed because the village code authorizes him to unilaterally award contracts valued at less than \$150,000 a year. Documents obtained by The Dispatch show that Raphael continued to bill the village after his initial contract had expired, prompting the village finance director to email him: "Will you please forward me your signed agreement, or extension?"

The village eventually resumed the \$5,000 monthly payments through the end of 2019 on the authority of Davisson's handwritten note across the top of a Raphael invoice stating: "EXTENSION 8-10K 9-5K 10-5K 11-5K 12-5K OK," atop a squiggled, undated signature, clearing the way for him to be paid another \$30,000 in tax dollars through the end of 2019.

[**Wisconsin health official won't handle matters affecting former clients**](#) (Wisconsin)

Gov. Tony Evers' new health secretary said Monday she would leave matters affecting her former lobbying clients to her top deputy to avoid conflicts of interest.

Karen Timberlake took over the state Department of Health Services last month after Secretary Andrea Palm was [**named to the No. 2 job**](#) in the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

Timberlake ran the Wisconsin agency under former Gov. Jim Doyle from 2008 to 2011 and in recent years has lobbied in the state for health-care interests.

In an interview Monday, Timberlake said she would recuse herself from matters affecting her former clients. That goes beyond what state law requires.

"I think it's the right thing to do because everyone would expect that I'm in this job to do the best that I can on behalf of all people in the state of Wisconsin," she said. "No one would want any of my former clients to get any sort of special treatment."

The state puts limits on government officials who go on to do lobbying work, but not on lobbyists who become government officials.

Timberlake said she would leave matters affecting her former clients to Deputy Secretary Julie Willems Van Dijk.

The agency Timberlake heads oversees swaths of the health care industry and helps determine how much money it makes in Wisconsin. Timberlake's department runs state-federal Medicaid programs like BadgerCare Plus and Family Care that cost billions of dollars a year.

The Democratic governor initially named Timberlake to the job on an interim basis but Timberlake said Monday she is committed to staying in the post until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When she took over as secretary, Timberlake and aides [did not say how she would handle potential conflicts](#). At the time, two national ethics experts said in interviews that she should separate herself from decisions affecting her past clients to avoid conflicts.

[Richard Painter](#), who served as the chief ethics lawyer to President George W. Bush and White House staff, said last month that Timberlake should not have a role in such decisions. [Norman Eisen](#), a Brookings Institution senior fellow who advised President Barack Obama on lobbying regulations, took a similar stance.

On Monday, Timberlake said she had adopted a personal policy along those lines.

"It's a simpler set of rules to follow to simply say that anything I was directly lobbying on before I'm not going to be the final decision-maker on," she said.

As a lobbyist with Michael Best Strategies, Timberlake represented DentaQuest, an oral health company; MyPath, a company that serves people with disabilities; Rogers Behavioral Health, which lobbies to raise Medicaid payments for behavioral health providers; and the Network for Innovation in Senior Care, a consortium of long-term and rehabilitative care providers.

In addition, Timberlake lobbied for two health care information technology entities: the Wisconsin Health Information Organization and the Wisconsin Statewide Health Information Network.

When Timberlake leaves her post, she will not be able to immediately return to lobbying on the same issues. State law bars former government officials from appearing before the agencies where they used to work for a year.

Pandemic makes politicking in New York's Capitol a take-out affair

New York pols will have to take all that money lavished on their campaigns by lobbyists and other interested parties — to go.

Fat cat-laden [fundraisers near the Capitol](#) in Albany while the Legislature is in session have been all but curbed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than 150 campaign fundraising events [usually take place](#) from January through June and dozens would normally have already been held or scheduled.

But many lawmakers are now staying home rather than trekking to Albany, conducting legislative business and fundraisers virtually instead.

“I lost 15 pounds because I’m no longer eating pigs in the blanket,” quipped one veteran lobbyist of the break from the fundraising circuit. “I feel much better. My cholesterol is down.”

The lobbyist said he would typically have an eight page list of in-person campaign fundraisers by this time. Now his list only includes three fundraisers — two of which are virtual.

The Albany insider is relieved — and his wallet is heavier.

“Everyone is chasing you for a buck. The pressure to give is enormous. That pressure has subsided because of the pandemic,” the lobbyist said.

State senate candidates can raise a maximum \$7,500 from individuals for a primary election and \$11,000 for a general election. Assembly candidates can accept \$4,700 each from individuals for primary and general elections.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Albany's most prodigious fundraiser, who is [known to hold events](#) with donors dependent on state actions during budget negotiations, also [has gone](#) virtual. His celebrity-studded birthday fundraiser in December was on Zoom.

Conversely, the pandemic has decimated Albany's catering halls and bars and restaurants, dependent on events held by lawmakers when the legislature is in town.

The building that houses the University Club, a 27-room hotel and catering hall, is now up for sale.

In order to survive, the University Club's general manager, Mimi Fahy, said she now offers "to go" food and beverage options for lawmakers hosting virtual fundraisers.

"We have developed a 'to-go' fundraiser option for virtual fundraisers. They can call me and order 20-25 dinners to go," Fahy said.

The offerings promoted on the website include chicken parmigiana, linguine with white clam sauce, spaghetti and meatballs, and cheesecake.

Most of her 27 lodging rooms, normally full pre-pandemic, sit empty.

Other venues are barely hanging on such as the Fort Orange Club and Iron Gate Cafe while others are closed, including City Beer Hall, Pinto-Hobbes and Public House 42.

The elimination of in-person events has made fundraising more challenging for legislators. Some donors said their spam filters are blocking email fundraising solicitations from incumbents and other candidates.

"I would say it [campaign fundraising] has slowed down during the pandemic. But part of that is that so much goes directly to spam. We have all adjusted our spam filters to cut down on unsolicited emails that have increased so substantially in the virtual world the pandemic has imposed on us," said Kathryn Wylde, CEO of the NYC Partnership, the city's influential business trade group.

As for the virtual elimination of in-person fundraisers, she said, "Silver lining, but much harder to keep up on the gossip!"

Bronx Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz said he held an Albany fundraiser early last year before the pandemic hit, but that's no longer in the cards.

"It's going to be harder to raise money. People who contribute like to meet you. I've enjoyed the fundraising events over the years. You get to schmooze with people," he said.

Dinowitz, who represents the Riverdale area, said last year he dedicated more time to personally calling regular donors for contributions and will likely do so again until the COVID-19 outbreak fades away.

One veteran Albany watchdog said the suspension of in-person fundraisers doesn't mean the politicians aren't raking in cash.

"I assume now the campaign contributions are much more likely to flow through something like Venmo rather than a wicker basket outside a meeting room where people are drinking cheap wine out of plastic cups and eating pigs in a blanket," said Blair Horner, of the NY Public Interest Research Group.

"The pandemic has fundamentally altered the way Albany operates and this is one of them but the money still has to flow."