



M U L T I S T A T E

[How Should Springfield Clean Up After The ComEd Scandal? Lawmakers' Reform Plans Are Hazy](#) (Illinois)

With less than seven weeks left in their spring session, Illinois lawmakers have yet to put up new ethical guardrails in response to the historic Commonwealth Edison bribery scandal that toppled ex-House Speaker Michael Madigan and led to a series of federal indictments.

Given the nature of Madigan's dramatic and forced departure, meting out some kind of meaningful, legislative consequences for the powerful utility company's misconduct would be a logical response for Illinois lawmakers this spring.

A pair of potential rewrites to state utility law give some prominence to ethics reforms related to the revelations in the ComEd probe, but nothing under consideration would seriously curb the outsized political influence ComEd has enjoyed for decades in Illinois.

Last summer, [ComEd admitted](#) to a long-running bribery scheme aimed at influencing Madigan by awarding his political allies with lucrative no-work jobs and contracts. Federal prosecutors say ComEd's goal was to secure favorable legislation in Springfield, including electricity rate hikes.

Apart from the criminal case against ComEd, the utility put relatives of politicians on its payroll and filtered money through a foundation [to a top utility watchdog](#) that later backed some of its priorities and has been a reliably prolific campaign donor, doling out more than \$3.1 million in contributions during the nearly decade-long run of corruption.

Despite the scope of the scandal and its fallout — Madigan was long [the most powerful politician in Illinois](#) — the prospects for ethics reform this year are now hazy.

The two Democratic legislative leaders aren't saying yet exactly what reforms, if any, they're willing to push to passage. And a May 31 adjournment deadline looms with the ever-present danger that the pandemic could send lawmakers home from Springfield with little notice.

Still, a top aide to Gov. JB Pritzker says accountability and reform must be marquee elements of any package if it's going to be signed into law by the governor this spring or summer. The Chicago Democrat intends to present his own, new outline to lawmakers as early as next week.

"Any energy legislation he is going to find worthy of support is going to need to lead with ethics reform," said Deputy Gov. Christian Mitchell, Pritzker's point person on a possible utility omnibus.

ComEd continues to operate with a scaled-back lobbying presence, a clear after-effect of the company's stunning ethical nosedive last summer as spelled out in an agreement with U.S. Attorney John Lausch to defer a criminal probe into the company. ComEd agreed to pay \$200 million to the government as part of that deal.

Madigan has denied wrongdoing and knowledge of the scheme. The former speaker and state Democracy Party chair has not been charged.

Even if ComEd is a weakened brand, the company's corporate sister, Exelon Generation, has kept up pressure on lawmakers for a new bailout for its struggling Illinois nuclear business. It [announced](#) late last summer that it would prematurely shut down its Dresden and Byron nuclear plants in northern Illinois. The move would cost 1,500 full-time jobs — many held by Democrat-aligned union electricians — and threaten to undermine the Pritzker administration's aim to wean Illinois from fossil fuel.

The governor's office has commissioned its own study to determine what kind of subsidies would be necessary to keep the two nuclear plants in operation. A [report released Wednesday](#) justified roughly \$350 million in ratepayer subsidies to Exelon over five years.

And on a separate front, ComEd [filed](#) paperwork with the Illinois Commerce Commission on Friday to seek a \$51 million rate increase, effective in January, its first such request in four years.

Lawmaker: "It's really a shame that we have to babysit" ComEd

There are competing bills in the General Assembly directed at ComEd for its ethical lapses.

In the House, state Rep. Ann Williams, D-Chicago, is carrying [legislation](#) to establish a path for ratepayers to win restitution if a utility company engages in criminal wrongdoing. In its deferred prosecution agreement, ComEd said its corrupt lobbying yielded legislative victories valued at more than \$150 million for the company.

Her legislation also would do away with [automatic rate increases for ComEd customers](#) based on a preset formula. It would bar utilities like ComEd from billing ratepayers for charitable contributions or for legal fees tied to criminal investigations.

And Williams' measure would establish a czar to oversee utility ethics compliance at the Illinois Commerce Commission, which regulates utilities.

That czar would have access to a database that ComEd and other utilities would be required to log, showing "requests for anything of value" sought by public officials or their staffs. But those records of potential job or contract asks wouldn't be directly accessible to the public under current language in Williams' bill — something she said she's willing to reconsider.

Her legislation also would prevent ComEd-hired lobbyists from subcontracting, which the company acknowledged in its deferred prosecution agreement as a way political friends of Madigan's were funneled rewards. That practice, which evaded state lobbying disclosure rules, enabled ComEd lobbyists to hire Madigan associates as consultants, who did little to no work.

"It's really a shame that we have to babysit the utilities in this way," Williams told WBEZ. "But unfortunately, ComEd has shown us that they were really willing to make a mockery of the legislative process."

Williams, chairwoman of the House Energy and Environment Committee, said she intends to ask Democratic House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch's office for permission to hold a hearing in her committee to delve more deeply into ethics and accountability measures in response to the ComEd scandal.

Her legislation counts Welch, of Hillside, as a co-sponsor, but he hasn't signaled if her template is the one he'll seek to pass this spring.

In a statement, a Welch spokesman said the speaker "hasn't been involved" with Williams' legislation or another one pushed by organized labor.

"His goal is to restore confidence in government and address shortfalls identified following the ComEd issue," Welch spokesman Sean Anderson said in the statement.

Last summer, Welch presided over legislative hearings that delved into Madigan's conduct involving ComEd. But Welch signed off on efforts to shut down the inquiry without any sanctions against the former speaker.

In January, with Madigan's blessing, [Welch took over as speaker](#) when Madigan couldn't get enough votes to be reelected largely due to fallout from the still-active federal probe into ComEd's dealings in Springfield.

In the Senate, state Sen. Michael Hastings, D-Frankfort, has sponsored [legislation](#) aimed at making ComEd refund \$200 million to ratepayers — the same amount the company paid to settle its federal bribery case with the federal government last summer. It also would establish a utility ethics monitor at the ICC and prohibit ComEd from billing ratepayers for costs associated with a criminal investigation into its conduct and for benefits for any employees convicted of crimes associated with the misconduct.

"I think it's essential," Hastings said of utility-oriented ethics reforms, "and the reason I say that is the public needs to be able to trust their public utility system and their government when it comes down to what I consider essential needs."

Hastings, who is chair of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee and a declared candidate for secretary of state, said he could foresee a final ethics package that would encompass the provisions contained in both his and Williams' measures.

Senate President Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, would not say if he was satisfied with any of the ComEd-driven ethics reforms on the table so far or outline specific ideas of his own related to the lobbying scandal.

"We are reviewing proposals," Harmon spokesman John Patterson said.

A spokeswoman for ComEd said company executives embrace a retooling of ethics requirements.

"We expect that a variety of proposals will be considered and look forward to discussions with lawmakers and other stakeholders about how best to incorporate ethics requirements into legislation that ensures clean, reliable, and affordable energy for all Illinois residents," ComEd spokeswoman Shannon Breymaier said in a statement.

“ComEd’s newly implemented ethics policies already prohibit subcontracting of both third-party lobbyists and political consultants and require tracking of all requests, referrals and recommendations from public officials,” she said.

Those internal procedures have been in place since July 2020, she said, shortly before the announcement of the company’s deferred prosecution with the U.S. attorney’s office.

The ethics reforms lawmakers aren’t discussing

The ethics reforms directed at ComEd introduced so far are a move in the right direction but need to carry more bite, some consumer advocates say.

“Do I think this is good? I would say it’s a start,” said Robert Gallo, state director of Illinois AARP, which represents 1.7 million seniors in the state and is a major consumer advocate on utility issues. “I don’t think it really answers or addresses the problem and how it started.”

A recent meeting with the speaker has left Gallo feeling encouraged that some ethics measures will advance this session.

“He emphasized his top priority is for the citizens of Illinois to regain trust in government,” Gallo said. “I felt he was sincere about that.”

For example, no policies under consideration would bar utility campaign contributions. Nor would they impose any kind of lifetime lobbying ban on any utility lobbyists who may be convicted as part of the ComEd investigation or any future corruption probes. Nor are logs of legislative favors publicly accessible.

Additionally, there presently are no reforms directed at the Citizens Utility Board, which was created as a utility watchdog by the legislature in 1983 and barred from accepting “gifts, loans and other aid” from utility companies. Despite that law, a WBEZ [investigation](#) last September documented at least \$11.55 million in funding for CUB that came from a pair of utility-funded foundations during the past two decades.

The practice drew condemnation from consumer groups nationally and in Illinois, with Gallo saying last fall that the group had “fed at the utility trough just like the rest of them.”

CUB, which has signed on as a supporter to Williams’ legislation, has said the money it has accepted over the years from utility-funded foundations has not compromised its independence and that it frequently is at odds with the utility.

More recently, Illinois AARP, Illinois PIRG and the Environmental Law & Policy Center put together a laundry list of reform demands driven by the ComEd scandal, including ratepayer restitution and an end to utility company political contributions. CUB was noticeably absent from the effort.

“Utilities just can’t amass the same level of political power in the future as they’ve had in the past,” said Illinois PIRG Director Abe Scarr.

Another aspect of the state’s campaign finance law that merits scrutiny in light of the ComEd scandal is the time-honored practice of public officials who run afoul of the law turning to their campaign funds to pay criminal defense lawyers, said state Rep. Deanne Mazzochi, R-Elmhurst.

Since October, Madigan’s personal campaign fund, Friends of Michael J. Madigan, spent more than [\\$3.7 million](#) for work by a Chicago law firm specializing in white collar criminal cases. A Madigan spokesman attributed part of that expense to costs associated with complying with subpoenas from U.S. Attorney John Lausch’s office.

A member of the House panel that investigated Madigan last year, Mazzochi has sponsored legislation to bar campaign expenditures for mounting a criminal defense or for civil cases “pertaining to misconduct by a person in his or her capacity as a public official, sexual harassment claims or discrimination claims.”

Her bill has remained bottled up in the Democratic-led House. Its prospects appear dim.

“This just shows there’s so much power that is put in the speaker’s office,” Mazzochi said. “Even when it came to the ways in which [Madigan] was using those campaign funds, people still didn’t believe they had any choice but to donate.”

The contours of a legislative response to the ComEd scandal remain murky, but Illinois lawmakers should be duty-bound to reel in a powerful utility accustomed to steamrolling its way through Springfield, says one leading national watchdog.

“These types of legislative scandals should be easy to stop as long as you’ve got the right kind of comprehensive ethics and lobbying reforms in place,” said Tyson Slocum, who directs the energy program for Washington, D.C.-based Public Citizen, which was founded by consumer activist Ralph Nader. “It doesn’t appear as though states are doing enough to establish those standards in the wake of these scandals.”

[Humboldt County owes \\$14K in campaign filing fines](#) (California)

Politicians, lobbyists and campaign donors owe approximately \$2 million in fines to the California Secretary of State's office for tardy disclosure reports allowing outstanding fines to languish without consequence. A handful of Humboldt County locals are on the [list](#).

The debts are owed by a range of political players, according to a list published on the California Secretary of State's website that details outstanding fines as of April 1. It shows fines owed by 26 state lawmakers and 21 superior court judges, as well as former legislators, losing candidates, ballot measure campaigns, Democratic and Republican clubs, and corporate and labor-backed political action committees.

According to the Secretary of State's website, "If a campaign or lobbying disclosure form is filed with the Secretary of State after a statutory deadline, the filer is liable for a fine of \$10 per day late until the form is filed (California Government Code Section 91013)."

The Secretary of State's spreadsheet of outstanding fines dates back to 2004 and does not indicate a single increase in penalties.

Humboldt County, the Humboldt County Republicans and the Green Party of Humboldt County appear on the list several times and collectively owe about \$17,000.

County Administrative Officer Amy Nilsen, listed as the responsible officer on behalf of the County of Humboldt, owes four separate fines from 2019 and 2020 totaling \$14,740.

Former Eureka City Council candidate Floyd Joseph Bonino owes two fines totaling \$1,460 filed through the Humboldt County Republicans in 2012.

Northern Humboldt Unified School District board of trustees member Dana Silvernale owes \$729 from 2019 on behalf of the Green Party of Humboldt.

Reached by email late Thursday afternoon, Humboldt County spokesperson Manny Machado said the county has already followed up with a waiver request which is awaiting review by the Political Reform Division.

"The county's fines originated from the late submittal of Form 635 for the quarters ending Jan. 1, 2019, April 1, 2019, Oct. 1, 2019 and Jan. 1, 2020," Machado said. "We were informed that the Auditor-Controller, who through at least February 2021 was previously listed as the responsible

party, requested a waiver through the state's waiver process due to the transition of the Auditor-Controller's office to the current Auditor-Controller."

"Form 635 is a quarterly disclosure statement required by the State of any person or entity employing or contracting with a lobbying firm to influence legislative or administrative action," Machado added.

The form requires filers to provide the amount and recipient of payments to lobbying firms, along with the legislative or administrative action lobbied. Machado said the county is also required to attach Form 640 which includes "other payments" that are more than \$250 to be itemized as well as "dues and similar payments made to an organization that makes expenditures equal to 10% of its total expenditures, or \$15,000 or more in the quarter, to influence legislative or administrative action."

Bonino and Silvernale did not return the Times-Standard's request for comment ahead of print deadline.

Many of the 2,780 listed fines are very small. About 300 of them are less than \$100, reflecting paperwork filed a few days late — a routine violation of campaign finance law that's the political equivalent of a parking ticket.

However, 45 of the fines are more than \$10,000. The largest outstanding fine for a public official is nearly \$38,000 owed by Alameda County Superior Court Judge Jennifer Madden stemming from her 2016 campaign.

Though the \$2 million in unpaid fines are a tiny portion of California's more than \$200 billion annual budget, it raises the question as to whether the state is effectively enforcing a law designed to increase transparency and prevent corruption.

"The fact that these fines (on politicians and judges) can go unpaid without any consequence, it's definitely an illustration of privilege," Natasha Minsker, a lobbyist who has pushed for more leniency in traffic fines, told CalMatters.

The lax enforcement is a far cry from the experience ordinary Californians face if they, for example, neglect to pay a traffic ticket. Those fines increase when people don't pay. Eventually, people can be charged with a misdemeanor for not paying, or have their tax refunds seized through a debt collection process.

“Once you get a fine in the criminal justice system, it compounds and increases and it easily takes over your life if you are low-income,” Minsker said.

California Secretary of State Shirley Weber told CalMatters she would look into the issue to see if any changes can be made but said the issue persisted long before she took office in January.

“It’s a large amount of money, and so the question is: What can we legitimately do?” Weber said. “They’ve done things in the past, (but) what good is a fining system if you can’t enforce it?”

Lobbyist’s lawsuit accusing former superintendent of abusing power reaches settlement (West Virginia)

A lobbyist and West Virginia’s former schools superintendent have settled a federal lawsuit.

A [stipulation of dismissal](#) was filed in federal court this week. Sources said the settlement was for \$500,000.

The state Department of Education’s statement said it was following the recommendation of the state Board of Risk and Insurance Management. “It is our understanding that the recommendation to settle was made for reasons of economic efficiency and is not an admission of liability,” the department.

The department noted, “This Agreement effects the settlement of claims that are denied and contested and does not constitute an admission of wrongdoing or liability by any party.”

Longtime lobbyist Jason Webb [filed suit](#) in 2019 alleging former Superintendent Steve Paine used his authority to try to have him fired. At the time, Webb was lobbying for the national standardized testing company, ACT.

[Paine](#) was the state Superintendent of Schools twice, serving first from 2005 to 2011 and then returning in 2017. He received an exemplary performance evaluation from the state Board of Education and then suddenly [announced his retirement](#) in early 2020, citing desire to focus on his family.

Webb contends the superintendent sought to chill his criticism, asking for compilations of the lobbyist’s tweets and confronting leaders of the national testing company. Webb’s lawsuit also names Barth and says she pushed for rival SAT to bring on board a lobbyist who could counter Webb.

The lawsuit claimed that several times in 2018 and 2019, Paine personally called top ACT officials — including the chief executive officer — to push for Webb to stop from publicly criticizing the Department of Education, particular education policies or other standardized testing vendors.

If not, the lawsuit claims, “Paine would ensure that ACT would never do business with the State of West Virginia again.”

The lawsuit contends those actions violated Webb’s First Amendment Rights and “constitutes tortious interference with Webb’s business relationship with his client ACT.”

“The lesson of this case is that the First Amendment matters. Truth matters,” Webb said in a written statement.

“And, that it is important to stand up against those who would retaliate against private citizens for exercising their First Amendment rights.”

Paine and Barth countered that the Department of Education believed Webb was using his social media accounts for misleading and insulting commentary, particularly about Common Core math. They contended their efforts were to track what was being said and set it straight.

Webb concluded, “Not only did Defendants Paine and Barth lose in a federal court order on several elements, but they also surely lost in the Court of Public Opinion.”

The case, at one point, had been set to go to trial March 30 in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of West Virginia. U.S. District Judge John Copenhaver [had already ruled](#) on some key aspects of the case.

Copenhaver determined that Webb’s criticism of Paine and state education policies were protected — and that there was a direct line to Paine’s retaliation.

Webb, in his statement, said most people at the Department of Education and in public administration are doing their best to move the state forward. But he said it’s important for those who hold public office to not break the public trust.

“As my legal filings demonstrated, Paine and Barth broke that trust and did so while using public resources—the taxpayers’ \$1.8 billion dollar budget—and involving others within the WV

Department of Education to go after me in a campaign to violate my First Amendment rights,” he said.

“The public need only read through the evidence filed in my case to realize the full extent of what happened to me and what has been going on at the Department of Education.”

The Department of Education’s statement expressed disappointment over the conflict and its conclusion.

“The Department is disappointed that what appear to be personal disagreements have come to this end, and we remain concerned about our future ability to confront and dispute public statements that we perceive to misrepresent the work of our agency.”

[How the University of Michigan exerts varying levels of influence on local, state and national politics](#) (Michigan)

University of Michigan alum Ben Keller was a sophomore interning at the U-M office in Washington D.C. in the summer of 2016, responsible for lobbying members of Congress on policies largely pertaining to higher education. According to Keller, the experience taught him how much influence large research universities like the University hold in impacting policy.

“I think Michigan has a ton of influence, unique influence, especially in the federal policymaking process because we’re such a large research institution,” Keller said. “We’re doing a lot of it, we’re so recognized for it. So we really hold a lot of sway.”

Keller noted that as a public institution, the University has to rely greatly on federal support, and as such must do everything in its power to ensure funding remains stable. For example, much research funding specifically comes in the form of the [\\$514 million](#) the University received in 2020 from the National Institutes of Health.

“We’re very dependent on those federal dollars to continue our research process going,” Keller said. “There’s every so often higher education bills that come through Congress and they have to get renewed. So we’re heavily involved in that and making sure that funding doesn’t get stripped away.”

As a result, the University spends large sums of money each year lobbying members of Congress in Washington, D.C., and — as a registered lobbying entity — must disclose all lobbying activities. In 2020, the University spent [\\$410,000](#) lobbying members of Congress.

According to Keller, this spending manifested itself in the activities he was taking part in as a member of the team at the D.C. office. Keller recalled examples of this spending, such as golf outings with members of other university government relations offices and participation in events held by members of Congress attended by lobbyists.

“Whenever a Congress member or constituent group was having any sort of event around research or change in federal research priorities or money, grants, anything like that, we would want to get involved in it,” Keller said.

Sarah Niemann, a Public Policy junior studying education policy, echoed Keller’s assessment of public universities’ need to lobby members of Congress to ensure funding remains consistent.

“The larger the university that you are, and the larger the endowment that you have, the larger role you are going to play in D.C. politics,” Niemann said. “Smaller universities might not have as large of a role and so large public universities like Michigan, as far as my knowledge goes, would have a larger influence.”

The University’s [endowment](#), valued at approximately \$12 billion dollars, is the pool of assets given by the University donors. As of 2019, according to [reports](#) from the U.S. Department of Education, U-M had the ninth largest endowment in the country.

Kristina Ko, the Director of the University’s D.C. office, said that recent lobbying efforts by the University have largely been based around the Pell Grant program.

“This Congress, U-M is advocating for the higher education community-wide request to double the maximum Pell Grant award,” Ko said. “Currently, the maximum award is \$6,495. Across all three U-M campuses, more than 11,600 U-M students benefited from the Pell Grant in the previous school year. The Pell Grant is the federal government’s foundational investment in higher education. However, the share of college costs covered by a Pell Grant is at an all-time low.”

Some legislators have come to depend on funding from colleges and universities seeking to influence policy. In the case of U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, D-Mich., the University is his largest campaign [donor](#) and a source of frequent contact on policy and legislation. In a statement to The Daily, Peters referenced his office’s strong relationship with and support for the University.

“The University of Michigan is a world class institution and a major economic driver for our state,” Peters wrote. “I’m proud to work with them on issues that help keep Michigan at the forefront of innovation, like autonomous vehicle technology, expanding STEM and updating research and science law. Earlier this year, I worked to secure COVID relief funding for higher

education institutions and students, and I'll continue to be a partner to Michigan schools as they work to overcome the impacts of this pandemic.”

State officials have also said that recent policy, especially pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, was influenced by the University — though not by university government relations staff, but rather by the University's public health experts.

According to Samantha Kennedy, the Deputy Press Secretary for Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, the governor's office collaborated with U-M public health experts on combating the spread of COVID-19.

“The governor is grateful to be able to closely consult with nationally-recognized public health experts at the University of Michigan, as well as other state universities,” Kennedy said. “This pandemic has shown us that it is vital to collaborate with the best and brightest to ensure that the most up-to-date information and practices are at the forefront of the administration's efforts to eliminate COVID-19 once and for all.”

U-M Vice President for Government Relations Chris Kolb also emphasized the frequent contact occurring between the University and state government.

“(The government relations office) tracks legislation of interest to all state universities and U-M specifically,” Kolb said. “In a legislative session, our office will track nearly 350 bill proposals and communicate to university stakeholders to solicit their views and input.”

On the local level, the University's contribution to policy within the city of Ann Arbor is far different. In most regards, the relationship between the city and University could best be described as symbiotic, with minimal intervention of one entity on another.

According to Ann Arbor Mayor Christopher Taylor, the University intervenes minimally in matters pertaining to the city of Ann Arbor, and vice versa.

“The University is a great respecter of role,” Taylor said. “They don't get involved in standard municipal matters, and they look for the same on the other side for us not to get involved in standard University matters. If the University has an interest in something the city is doing, adjacent properties, say or what have you, they'll communicate it.”

One reason for this, according to Taylor, is that legally speaking, the University is a state entity on par with the Michigan legislature, due to its being established by the state constitution.

“The University has land, money and constitutional superiority,” Taylor said. “The University is not obligated to follow our rules, and so our choice to zone this, that or the other thing this way or that way is not generally of driving importance to them. The University is a benevolent actor in the community, but they act on their own because they have the legal right to do it and the resources to do it.”

However, this practice of general non-intervention is often not the case with large universities. In 2017 for instance, Michigan State University — with much public [criticism](#) — [offered](#) the city of East Lansing \$20 million to not institute a local income tax. Though public universities are property tax-exempt, an income tax would’ve required MSU to pay which would be taken out of the employee payroll.

Taylor said he does not believe the University would have taken such actions to infringe on the jurisdiction of the city of Ann Arbor, even if it were to consider a similar policy.

“Michigan State (University) had a lot of commentary about whether East Lansing would institute an income tax,” Taylor said. “That was something that they engaged substantially. In order to have an income tax in Michigan, a city has to put that matter up to the voters. So Michigan State University was involved in negotiations and letters back and forth with the city, but they had a position and they advocated for that. The University of Michigan would never do that.”

The division between the city of Ann Arbor and U-M also has limited the city’s ability to influence the University’s decisions. In Dec. 2020, after the University [decided](#) to only allow a small number of students to return to on-campus housing for the Winter 2021 semester, Ann Arbor officials urged administrators to provide emergency housing for the city’s homeless population. Despite Ann Arbor city council members pressing the University to agree to the partnership, no further action was taken by the University administration.

Though the University may set a clear policy boundary between their institution and the city of Ann Arbor, they hold a significant role in lobbying at the federal level. According to Keller, however, this type of spending is par for the course in D.C. politics and manifests itself in the influence a university has.

“All this stuff just comes down to relationship building, and that’s what lobbying is,” Keller said. “If you’re trying to influence what’s going on, you’ve got to have a relationship with who’s making it happen.”

[Zoom Political Fundraisers Win Fans Even as Covid Curbs Fall](#) (U.S.)

Zoom fundraising, born of necessity during the pandemic, will likely remain a part of the Washington political scene even as increased vaccinations and the gradual lifting of Covid-19 restrictions mark a return to in-person events.

Lobbyists involved in raising money express mixed feelings about fundraisers in a virtual setting — with many eager to get back to gathering in person. Still, online events have been a boon for many members of Congress, who appreciate the convenience, almost 20 advocates and fundraisers said in interviews.

“If you’re a member, you can jump out into your chief’s car right outside the Cannon building and do a Zoom event,” said Marc Lampkin, managing partner of Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck’s Washington office, referring to the Cannon House Office Building across from the Capitol. “There are a lot of efficiencies that go along with that.” Lawmakers are barred from fundraising in their offices.

The evolution in fundraising comes as candidates, parties and political action committees are planning the next round of money events in anticipation of what is likely to be an expensive 2022 election where control of both chambers of Congress is at stake.

Even with the return to more in-person events, members in both parties are still doing at least half of their pitches on digital platforms such as Zoom, interviews and schedules obtained by Bloomberg Government show.

Molly Allen, a Democratic fundraiser, said virtual fundraising will continue as long as there is an appetite for it and there continues to be a return on investment.

“I have to think about the ROI,” she said. “And if I have to limit the number of people, where I can only have three in person versus 10 on a Zoom, I’m going to do 10 on the Zoom.” These could also prove cost-effective for allowing local trade association members to connect with their districts’ lawmakers, she said.

Spicing It Up

Some political committees have tried to spice up the sterile environment of the Zoom fundraiser by delivering drinks or dinner to attendees, by playing trivia, offering cocktail mixing classes, or having John Podesta, who worked for Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, demonstrate how to make an Italian dinner.

For campaigns looking to pinch pennies, virtual fundraisers can have much lower, or close to zero, overhead costs in comparison with booking a restaurant or venue.

“It’s actually, in a way, oddly more effective and kind of crisp,” said Brian Ballard, a lobbyist at Ballard Partners and fundraiser for the National Republican Committee. “I don’t live under any illusions that most of these politicians care about how my family’s doing. We’re all here to do our business and be efficient with our time and resources, so I like it.”

“Listen, I miss playing golf with guys, but also it takes three days to do something we can do in 20 minutes,” said Ballard. “I’m sure it’ll slowly evolve back to the old ways, but I hope some of it stays.”

Democratic and Republican lobbyists said that members were more willing to have mini-fundraisers on FaceTime calls with one or just a few people.

“I have clients who are still in the process of establishing relationships with members and would much rather do one-on-one events. There’s just been a significant increase in flexibility and willingness to do that, virtually, than there would be in person,” said Anne MacMillan, a Democratic lobbyist at Invariant.

One solicitation from a Republican member’s fundraiser, obtained by Bloomberg Government, offered a one-on-one meeting with the lawmaker if the lobbyist recipient was unable to make the virtual event.

Missing Schmoozing

For some, the lack of a commute to and from a D.C. restaurant and dealing with small talk has been a benefit. Others miss the in-person schmoozing.

“This event goes beyond fundraising, but for meetings in general, what I find is that the 15 minutes before or the 15 minutes after” is “the most productive part,” said David Castagnetti, a co-founder at Mehlman Castagnetti Rosen & Thomas,

However, if “you’re sitting around a Zoom,” he says, “you don’t have the ability to ask a follow up or read the room, it’s more, ‘Here’s your two seconds.’”

Republican lawmakers have been raising funds in person over the last year, including trips to Florida, events at D.C. restaurants such RPM Italian and Joe’s, or at private residences and golf

outings. A schedule from the House Republicans' fundraising arm shows almost 90 in-person events this year, including 14 trips, according to a document Bloomberg Government obtained.

The pandemic has intensified the concept of "two tiers of fundraising and donors," said David Tamasi, a co-founder of Chartwell Strategy Group.

Republican members are favoring more personal lunches and dinners at popular haunts such as The Capital Grille, limited to six people because of coronavirus restrictions, several lobbyists said.

"You're able to now find more opportunities for smaller groups, or one-on-one interactions that didn't exist before," while others are more often relegated solely to Zoom fundraisers, he said. "You're able to leverage the current giving environment to be able to strengthen your relationship," Tamasi said.

Outdoor Fundraisers

Democratic lobbyists expect the pace of outdoor fundraisers to increase by summertime, and a full return to the larger events won't return until after Labor Day. One schedule of House Democratic fundraising events shows only one in-person event slated for November.

However, invitations obtained by Bloomberg Government included a Rep. Eric Swalwell (D-Calif.) event at the TopGolf in National Harbor in Maryland this month; the Blue Dog PAC is having its annual summer retreat at The Greenbrier, a posh hotel in West Virginia in July; and Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) is having a retreat in Santa Fe in September.

In-person events will likely be more popular once things return to normal, say some lobbyists.

"A lot of members I talk to, they like the Zooms. I think they'll keep doing it for as long as they can get away with it," said Steve Elmendorf, a lobbyist close with Democratic leadership. But eventually, "people are going to be like, if I'm going to give you \$1,000 — I want to see you."

[Nursing Homes Spent at Least \\$6 Million on Ohio Politics in Five Years](#) (Ohio)

Ohio's nursing home industry poured at least \$6.1 million into state politics and an array of dark money political groups between 2016 and 2020, an Ohio Capital Journal investigation has found.

The surge in spending comes as the state has steadily increased its payments to nursing homes through Medicaid, a state and federally funded insurance program for the poor and elderly that pays care costs for about two-thirds of long term care residents.

While reimbursement rates for other health care providers are determined by the Ohio Department of Medicaid, nursing facilities' rates — the basis [for \\$6.2 billion in long-term care spending](#) every year — are guaranteed in [state law](#).

The result is a system in which state lawmakers accept millions of dollars for their campaigns from nursing homes, and then determine how much to pay individual homes for the care of Medicaid patients — the source of most facility revenue.

Between 2011 and 2017, the average Medicaid reimbursement rate (per patient per day) climbed from \$175 to \$193, a 10% increase, according to data from Miami University's Scripps Gerontology Center. A \$1 increase in the rate — multiplied by the roughly 36,000 Medicaid patients and 365 days per year — alone bears massive budget consequences.

Most of the political contributions trace back to the Ohio Health Care Association, which says it represents about 1,100 long term care providers that tend to an estimated 85,000 patients per day.

OHCA operates a 501(c)(4) non-profit entity that has contributed \$3.4 million between 2016 and 2019 to a web of fellow 501(c)(4)s, tax records show. These types of entities, technically known as “social welfare” groups but more commonly referred to as “dark money,” are not required to disclose their sources of funding.

They generally operate in the shadows, avoiding the public scrutiny of individual and PAC contributions.

Of the \$3.4 million from OHCA, \$365,000 went to Generation Now, a dark money spender that [pleaded guilty](#) earlier this year to its alleged role in a pay-for-play political scheme.

Federal prosecutors accused then-House Speaker Larry Householder, R-Glenford, of secretly operating Generation Now to [field nearly \\$61 million from FirstEnergy Corp. He then allegedly spent it to engineer passage of House Bill 6](#), a lucrative package of energy legislation including a nuclear plant bailout worth \$1.3 billion to FirstEnergy.

Prosecutors also accused the late Neil Clark, a high-powered Republican lobbyist, of playing a key role in the scheme. Clark worked as a lobbyist for OHCA for 30 years.

Besides the commonality through Clark, both OHCA and FirstEnergy contributed heavily to two of the same dark money groups — Securing Ohio’s Future and Generation Now. An affidavit attached to documents used to arrest Householder even [makes a reference to Householder’s fundraising efforts targeting nursing homes](#).

Bob Krapenc, an attorney representing Generation Now, declined to comment. Householder declined interview requests and did not respond to written questions.

The sudden rush of spending from the industry follows Householder’s return to public office in 2017 and his campaign to return to the Speaker’s dais through 2018. After winning his House seat, he began a fundraising campaign to help elect a slate of Republican candidates who would vote him into the Speaker’s office in 2019.

Several individual nursing home operators, their families, and industry lobbyists have also contributed massive sums, campaign finance records show. Brian Colleran, who operates a chain of 57 nursing homes, and his nearly wife contributed more than \$700,000 to Republicans between 2016 and 2020.

Ronald Wilhelm, an executive with Communicare and its chain of nursing homes, and his family donated a combined \$481,000 between 2011 and 2020.

PACs representing three industry trade associations spent about \$1.5 million on politics between 2011 and 2020. OHCA led the bunch with \$1.3 million during the period, compared to LeadingAge Ohio (\$66,000) and the Academy of Senior Health Sciences (\$137,000).

Some of the biggest elected recipients of industry funding (not including dark money) include:

- Householder: \$384,000
- Republican Gov. Mike DeWine and Lt. Gov. Jon Husted: \$331,000
- Sen. Tom Patton, R-Strongsville, who was recently named chairman of the Joint Medicaid Oversight Committee: \$157,000
- Former House Speaker Ryan Smith: \$88,000

Paper trail

Brian Colleran operates [Foundations Health Solutions](#), which manages 57 nursing homes around the state. He and his wife jointly were the largest political donors in the industry between 2011 and 2020, according to an Ohio Capital Journal analysis of campaign finance data.

Together, the Collerans gave about \$77,000 to Householder's campaigns; \$87,000 to Patton's campaigns (Patton says Brian Colleran is his second cousin); \$68,000 to DeWine's campaign; \$50,000 to Attorney General Dave Yost's campaign; large donations to a spread of PACs; and nearly \$200,000 split between 12 more candidates.

In 2017, Colleran and his business partner Daniel Parker paid nearly \$20 million to settle Medicaid fraud allegations that the U.S. Department of Justice lodged in 2012. They were [accused of billing claims to Medicaid for unnecessary treatment at 18 of their nursing facilities](#) and billing Medicare for hospice services for ineligible patients.

Prosecutors, representing three company whistleblowers, said Omnicare, a CVS subsidiary, paid a "grossly inflated price" of \$50 million to purchase Colleran's drug business, Pure Services Pharmacy.

Colleran, who prosecutors identified as the "principal architect" of the scheme, then steered his nursing homes' patients, most of whom are covered by Medicare and Medicaid, to Omnicare for prescriptions. Prosecutors [said this violates federal anti-kickback laws](#).

"The sole value to Omnicare was Pure Services' referral stream of [Colleran's company]-owned nursing facilities," DOJ lawyers wrote in the lawsuit. "The ostensible purchase price paid to Colleran was a kickback to Colleran for this referral stream."

The settlement is not a finding of guilt in the matter and none of the accused were convicted.

CVS did not respond to repeated inquiries. Colleran, through his company and a phone number he's associated with, could not be reached.

"That was between him, his attorneys and his accountant and I know nothing about that," Patton said in an interview.

Parker, Colleran's business partner, contributed more than \$93,000 in total between 2017 and 2020 to Householder, a GOP campaign committee, DeWine, House Majority Leader Bill Seitz, and Yost. He also gave nearly \$38,000 to DeWine.

Another Colleran associate, Robert Speelman, who prosecutors identified as Colleran's right-hand man, contributed more than \$25,000 to Householder and \$12,500 to DeWine-Husted between 2017 and 2018.

Yost did not respond to specific questions about accepting contributions from parties accused of Medicaid fraud and anti-kickback statute violations. Amy Natoce, a spokeswoman, provided a statement.

“Dave Yost’s extensive track record of rooting out fraud, holding the corrupt accountable and reforming government speaks for itself,” she said. “Contributions never have, and never will, play a role in his work to protect Ohioans.”

Another prominent donor from the industry, Ronald Wilhelm, president of the long-term care division at CommuniCare, is among the most prolific in state politics.

He and his family have contributed more than \$481,000 to state candidates between 2011 and 2020.

“I make contributions to support public officials I believe in, based on their character, values and beliefs,” he said in a written statement through a spokesman.

“I care about Ohio’s future and issues like education, school choice, deregulation and immigration reform. I want good leaders in Ohio, who bring in jobs to boost the economy, and that boost spills over to benefit us all.”

Dark money

Starting in 2016, 55 Green Meadows began contributing what would be a total of \$3.4 million over four years to a spread of 32 fellow 501(c)(4)s.

OHCA doesn’t hide its alignment with 55 Green Meadows. Both entities share an address (55 Green Meadows Drive, Lewis Center) and an executive director, Pete Van Runkle.

However, many of the entities 55 Green Meadows contributes to have no public profile and no explicit motivating political force. For instance, [Ohio Works](#), a mysterious entity whose federal tax exempt status was revoked in May 2020 for failing to file an annual report with the IRS, received \$395,000 from 55 Green Meadows.

Melissa McNulty, a GOP fundraiser named on Ohio Works’ [business documents](#), did not respond to inquiries via phone or LinkedIn.

55 Green Meadows' 2020 financial data is not yet publicly available through the IRS, so it's impossible to evaluate the full scope of its muscle during the last election cycle. OHCA provided its [2019 annual report](#), which has not yet been posted on the IRS' website, upon request.

Some of the largest benefactors of 55 Green Meadows between 2016 and 2019 include:

- \$395,000 to Securing Ohio's Future, a group supporting campaigns of both Gov. Mike DeWine and, [reportedly](#), his daughter, Alice DeWine, in her bid for Greene County prosecuting attorney
- \$365,000 to Generation Now. Federal prosecutors say they have recordings of Clark, who also lobbied for OHCA, saying Generation Now is under Householder's control.
- \$260,000 to the Ohio Progressive Collaborative, which funds liberal activism organizations like Innovation Ohio and LEAD Ohio
- \$260,000 to the Onward Policy Institute
- \$185,000 to the Ohio Law and Liberty Foundation, which [advocates](#) for "limited government and traditional jurisprudence"
- \$145,000 to the Revitalization Project
- \$140,000 to State Solutions, which has ties to the Republican Governors Association
- \$130,000 to America Works USA, which has ties to the Democratic Governors Association
- \$125,000 to American Freedom Builders
- \$125,000 to the House Building Fund
- \$115,000 to Renew Ohio
- \$105,000 to Liberty Ohio

Van Runkle declined interview requests. In a statement, he said the pandemic has highlighted the critical role OHCA plays for its members in advocating for nursing facilities and helping caregivers meet health and safety regulations.

He said the association has lobbied for 70 years with the hope of guiding policy toward outcomes that support the interests of quality long-term care for individuals and their families.

"OHCA and its members are also engaged in the political and issue advocacy process and make contributions, which are fully disclosed in filings required by law," he said.

Contributions to governor

DeWine received at least \$300,000 from nursing home industry operators and lobbyists between 2017 and 2020, according to a review of campaign finance records.

The bulk of it comes from the Collerans (\$68,000) and the Wilheims (\$72,500).

Some of the dark money spending from 55 Green Meadows flowed to entities that supported DeWine.

For instance, in 2018, Securing Ohio's Future [contributed \\$2.1 million](#) to Securing Ohio's Future Action Fund, which gave [\\$4.6 million to Majority Strategies](#), which spent millions backing DeWine. In 2019, Securing Ohio's Future [gave \\$100,000 to Protecting Ohio's Future Inc.](#)

The Cincinnati Enquirer reported that the similarly named Protecting Ohio Inc., which also received FirstEnergy funds via a pass-through entity, paid for mailers supporting the governor's daughter in her bid for Greene County prosecutor.

55 Green Meadows gave \$140,000 to State Solutions, an arm of the Republican Governors Association, which backed DeWine.

It also gave \$50,000 to the Ohio Governor's Residence and Office nonprofit, as well as \$10,000 to DeWine's inauguration committee.

Dan Tierney, a DeWine spokesman, declined to answer specific questions.

"Campaign donations do not play a role in the policy decisions of the DeWine Administration," he said in a statement.

Budget perks

In 1979, the Ohio General Assembly declared that day-to-day living conditions for many state nursing home patients were inhumane.

"Patient deaths from scalding hot water, roach and mice infestation, filthy rooms and toilets, sheets soiled with bodily wastes, and overcrowding were not uncommon," lawmakers wrote.

The homes, meanwhile, paid their administrators handsomely and would bill Medicaid for things like trips to Hawaii, ski and golf equipment, restaurant dinners and clothing.

The findings came in a [187-page, bipartisan report](#), based on 100 public hearings and testimony from 400 witnesses about conditions in state nursing homes. Out of the report came an overhaul of how the state regulates nursing homes, including placing the funding formula in law.

Democratic Rep. John Begala, who signed the 1979 report, said in a recent interview that sponsoring legislation that placed nursing homes' funding formula into state code turned into a personal regret of his. He said he wishes he wrote the bill to "sunset," or automatically expire after 10 years.

"It basically had the consequence, as the chief sponsor of the legislation, of making that statute a gravy train for both political parties to hit the nursing home up for major contributions every year," he said.

Republican Gov. John Kasich tried and failed to take on the industry, according to Greg Moody, a former senior aide on health policy and now a professor at Ohio State University's John Glenn College of Public Affairs.

Every two-year budget cycle, the administration tried to remove the [reimbursement formula](#) from law and let the Medicaid Department set the rates.

The Kasich administration scored an early win in 2011, Moody said, increasing funding to community-based elder care and tying more money to quality incentives. He attributed the win in part to a revenue shortfall that year. In every cycle since, however, nursing homes' reimbursements increased; facilities sidestepped serious quality incentives to improve their care; and the formula stayed under control of state lawmakers.

"Every budget [cycle], we submitted a budget with the formula coming out. Every budget in the House, they restored it," he said.

"It became this tradition. Going into the Senate, we would propose an alternative like a quality add-on. That would come out in the Senate. The budget would get enacted with no change in nursing facilities."

Seitz, a longtime lawmaker and top ranked Republican, gave a similar explanation.

"For 21 years, the administration has tried to put it in rule, and for 21 years, we've said no," he said.

The industry saw several budget wins in this time frame. The Republican-controlled General Assembly [rebuffed efforts from the Kasich administration in 2013 to impose serious quality incentives for their funding](#). In 2017, lawmakers added a market basket index into the formula, providing the industry an "annual statutory increase for nursing facilities tied to the Medicare market basket," [according to a report from the Joint Medicaid Oversight](#) Committee. The

adjustment amounted to a \$239 million increase for the two-year budget cycle, according to a [JMOC report](#).

Kasich vetoed the provision. He said in a [veto message](#) it would eliminate accountability and quality measures and, and squeeze the Medicaid Department's ability to "best ensure the quality and efficiency of Medicaid nursing facility programs."

In nearly unanimous votes in the [House](#) and [Senate](#), lawmakers overrode the veto. Only Mike Duffey, then a House Republican, opposed. Duffey did not respond to inquiries.

Similar industries, subject to Medicaid rates that depreciate over rebasing cycles, look on at concepts like annual inflationary adjustments in envy.

Larke Recchie, CEO of the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging, said in a statement in response to a new state budget proposal this week that home and community-based care need more support.

"While we appreciate that the House kept the Governor's one-time modest rate increase for home and community-based services in Medicaid, it's simply not enough," she said. "Over 2000 Ohioans are waiting to receive PASSPORT and other home and community-based services, while Ohio nursing homes have a 63% occupancy rate. Now more than ever older Ohioans want to remain in their home and avoid congregate care settings."

Ohio Assisted Living Association Executive Director Jean Thompson represents 587 facilities that assist elderly patients who require a lower level of care than skilled nursing.

She said her members' rates were set in 2006 and didn't receive any increase at all until 2019.

The market basket adjustment policy ended at the start of 2020 and was replaced with the current quality incentive structure. However, some experts say it's a toothless approach.

"My understanding of the current metrics is there aren't a lot of dollars at risk, and the metrics they have to meet are pretty easy to meet, so everybody meets them," said Susan Ackerman, a former JMOC executive director.

On Tuesday, the House Finance Committee released its edits of DeWine's proposed budget. Just like his predecessor, DeWine proposed letting the Medicaid Department set nursing homes' reimbursement rates. The House rebuffed the idea, releasing a plan that "reverts nursing home rates to statute, instead of by rule."

Lawmakers also added \$58 million in annual payments to nursing homes above what DeWine proposed in his executive budget.

Seitz said the pandemic clobbered nursing homes — their costs are way up from the pandemic and their patient loads are down. He said about half the new money is tied to quality incentives.

When asked if those incentives are strong enough, he pointed to a separate provision in the budget requiring the Medicaid Department to establish a commission of “seven nursing facility stakeholders” to analyze the current quality incentive system and make recommendations. House Speaker Bob Cupp, speaking to reporters Thursday, mentioned the stakeholder proposal as well.

“We do want to answer exactly that question: what is appropriate in terms of the quality measures?” he said.

A powerful shield against lawsuits

Last summer, DeWine signed into law [House Bill 606](#), which shields businesses from lawsuits related to COVID-19. It passed with bipartisan support.

The legislation raises the legal standard required for plaintiffs to sue health care providers for pandemic claims, requiring them to prove either “gross negligence” or a “reckless disregard of the consequences or intentional, willful, or wanton misconduct.”

It applies to all businesses, but the pandemic has left few industries more exposed than long-term care facilities, home to 40% of all Ohio’s pandemic mortality.

Exactly 419 lobbyists registered to pull and prod lawmakers one way or another, including [10 from OHCA](#) and [five from LeadingAge](#). It was the second-most lobbied bill of 2020, according to a [state report](#).

Lawmakers passed the bill over concerns from elder care advocates who argued the bill would unnecessarily make it harder to hold nursing homes, an industry with long-standing infection control problems, accountable.

Eighteen senators co-sponsored the bill, including Sen. Steve Wilson, R-Maineville, whose wife is the CEO of Otterbein Senior Life, which represents a chain of nursing homes and elder care facilities serving 4,000 clients. She earns about \$445,000 annually, [tax records](#) show.

Wilson did not respond to inquiries. John Fortney, a Senate spokesman, said the Legislative Inspector General was consulted and Wilson's co-sponsorship and vote in support of the bill were deemed appropriate.

"Based on the bill's broad coverage to businesses across Ohio, there was no problem with the Senator being one of dozens of legislators co-sponsoring or voting on the bill," he said.

Do nursing homes need the money?

Yes and no, according to Robert Applebaum, director of the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University.

The pandemic exacerbated a pre-existing staffing crisis in the industry, attributable in part to meager pay. However, there are no guarantees that new money from an enhanced reimbursement rate will trickle down to workers.

He, like several other Medicaid and nursing home experts interviewed for this report, said the current system gives way too much power to lobbyists via state lawmakers.

Medicaid reimburses care providers at much lower rates than private insurers. OHCA [says](#) Medicaid pays about \$14.60 per patient per day below the costs to facilities to provide care for them.

Maureen Corcoran, director of the Department of Medicaid, declined repeated interview requests.

At the end of the day, Moody said there's too much money going to an industry that doesn't seem to need it, gauging by high salaries of the operators and apparent room in their budgets for the political spending.

"A redistribution of taxpayer dollars occurred to an industry that didn't need it, purely because of how it was lobbied in the Legislature," he said.

[Michigan House unveils plan to overhaul ethics policies ranked last in country](#) (Michigan)

The Republican and Democratic leaders of the Michigan House revealed a plan Tuesday to institute wide-ranging government ethics reforms, targeting policies that have been ranked worst nationally for transparency.

At least some of the bills are proposing fundamental changes for lobbying and disclosure laws, which have been agreed on by House members on both sides of the aisle. They will be introduced later this week and discussed in committee beginning next week.

If all of them became law, they would alter how Lansing operates, providing additional oversight, de-emphasizing the so-called "lame duck" period and changing the House process for deciding when bills take effect. Similar reforms have been debated in Michigan for years.

"When you get outside of the small Lansing and Capitol community and tell people back home how their state government operates, you really see how bizarre some of our rules are and why so many people are losing their faith in government," House Speaker Jason Wentworth, R-Farwell, said. "We must do better and hold ourselves to a higher standard. We must listen to the people who sent us here and understand why they are losing faith."

The new plan would subject the Legislature and governor's office to open records requests and would require lawmakers to disclose information about their personal finances to a new "oversight panel." Similar ideas have previously drawn criticism from Senate Republican leadership. The Senate and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, would have to sign off on the new proposals for them to become law.

Michigan is one of two states that exempt lawmakers and the governor's office from open records requests and one of only two states that don't require legislators to file any type of disclosure about their personal finances to screen for conflicts of interest.

Those are two reasons the state [ranked last nationally when the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit news outlet Center for Public Integrity studied the 50 states](#) in a November 2015 "comprehensive assessment of state government accountability and transparency." The assessment gave states grades for public access to information, electoral oversight and lobbying disclosure, among 10 other categories.

House Minority Leader Donna Lasinski, D-Scio Township, and the organization Voters Not Politicians, which led the 2018 push for a citizens redistricting commission, are also backing the new ethics package.

"The people are asked too often to simply trust that elected officials are acting in the public interest and holding themselves accountable. That's a failed, unacceptable system," Lasinski said. "These reforms represent meaningful, if incremental, steps that will help restore citizens' faith in our government by increasing transparency and demanding high ethical standards from public servants."

The new House plan also features an array of lobbying reforms: Registered lobbyists would be generally barred from appointment to state boards, and legislators and department heads would be prohibited from becoming lobbyists for two years after leaving office. The latter proposal aims to end the so-called "revolving door" between state government and lobbying.

At the end of the 2020 session, former Rep. Jason Sheppard, R-Temperance, chairman of the House Government Operations Committee, registered to lobby 15 days after casting his final votes in the House.

Under the new proposals, lawmakers would also be banned from taking lobbying jobs out of state while still serving in Michigan, [something former Rep. Rebekah Warren, D-Ann Arbor, effectively did last year](#).

The Detroit News first reported on Nov. 17 that Warren had been hired by the interest group National Popular Vote and filed a lobbying disclosure on behalf of the organization in Pennsylvania. She also registered to lobby in North Carolina.

"This is an organization that I believe in and that I have known," the Democratic lawmaker said in an interview last year.

The new House plan would also require the support of a super majority of lawmakers for bills to pass during lame duck, the period between the election and the end of the term when departing legislators leave office. The House approved a similar proposal in February.

The House wants to create permanent ethics committee with equal membership from both parties to enforce ethics and conflicts of interest laws and investigate complaints about misconduct.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey, R-Clarklake, has voiced opposition to elements of the House plan. At a press conference in January, Shirkey told reporters he was "all in" for transparency but also "pretty dug in" against financial disclosure for lawmakers.

"I think that's fodder ... to go after people," Shirkey said of making information about lawmakers' outside sources of income available to the public.

In 2019, he said a personal financial disclosure law would "absolutely" discourage some qualified residents for running for office and told reporters, "I just don't think it's necessary."

But Nancy Wang, executive director of Voters Not Politicians, said her organization has been working to build support for "a comprehensive package of ethics, transparency and accountability reforms."

"We expect and encourage our legislators to work together in a bipartisan manner to pass these reforms into law as swiftly as possible," Wang said. "These bills won't solve all of the problems in Lansing, but they will be an important first step to put us on the right track to ensure our politicians are accountable to us."