



M U L T I S T A T E

[Lawmakers Report Receiving Fewer Gifts During Pandemic As Push For Ban Continues](#) (Pennsylvania)

Every May, state legislators and other public officials are required to file reports detailing, among other items, whether they received pricey gifts, transportation, or hospitality from lobbyists, businesses, nonprofit groups, or others with a stake in government.

Some years, those reports have revealed lawmakers accepting everything from overseas trips to free entry to black-tie galas on someone else's dime.

But for many lawmakers, 2020 was a banner year for staying home — and eschewing people bearing gifts, at least according to their limited disclosure forms.

Public filings with the State Ethics Commission show that, with some exceptions, Pennsylvania's 253 lawmakers did not report receiving anything of great value last year as the pandemic raged, forcing lockdowns and restrictions on travel and in-person gatherings.

The few gifts of note came largely before the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Pennsylvania in early March. Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman (R., Centre), for instance, reported receiving just over [\\$8,500 to attend conferences](#), including \$3,828 from the Pennsylvania Bar Association to go to its mid-year meeting in the Bahamas in late January.

Still, the push to ban elected officials from accepting gifts and other perks continues in the state legislature, despite the fact that past efforts have largely been met with indifference and near-total inaction.

Pennsylvania is in the [minority of states](#) with no limit on the size or number of gifts elected officials can accept — the only requirement is disclosure.

Even that has its limits: In their statements of financial interest filed with the [State Ethics Commission](#) each May, they need only disclose gifts worth \$250 or more, and transportation and hospitality worth \$650 or more.

Often, elected officials provide few details about a gift other than its worth and who paid for it — and sometimes, it's hard to even discern that much from their reports.

Over the past decade, state lawmakers have introduced bills calling for various types of bans. Many times, the legislation didn't even get a hearing. A key state House committee [did advance a measure to prohibit lawmakers](#) from accepting cash and limit other types of gifts in 2019, but the full chamber never took a vote.

The gift-ban issue gained traction and urgency after a 2014 scandal that revealed some House members had [accepted envelopes stuffed with cash](#) from an undercover informant posing as a lobbyist for law enforcement.

Both chambers at the time clamored to change their rules to prohibit cash gifts, though that fervor dulled, and the issue got pushed to the legislative back-burner.

Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat, signed an order when he took office in 2015 to [ban members of the executive branch from accepting gifts](#) and once again urged lawmakers to do the same as part of his 2021 budget plan.

Activists with [MarchOnHarrisburg](#) plan to put public pressure on Corman next month to bring a gift ban up for a vote. The grassroots group has pushed for a ban for years through some unusual means, including [raining down dollars labeled "bribe"](#) on lawmakers in the House chamber.

Rabbi Michael Pollack, executive director of MarchOnHarrisburg, said GOP leadership in the state House has committed to supporting a gift ban.

A spokesperson for House Majority Leader Kerry Benninghoff (R., Centre) did not directly address the question, but said by email the lawmaker "has always been supportive of bringing more accountability and transparency to elected and other government officials. We are currently examining and reviewing various options to advance those goals legislatively this session."

In the state Senate, Majority Leader Kim Ward (R., Westmoreland) is a co-sponsor of a [bill](#) that would ban cash gifts and prevent lawmakers from taking anything of value from those seeking to influence official action.

That leaves Corman, Pollack said, who has faced [scrutiny](#) for his [ties to lobbyists](#).

Jason Thompson, a spokesperson for Corman, did not respond to Spotlight PA's questions about whether the senator supports gift ban legislation. Thompson recently told the Capital-Star he "[could not comment on a gift ban](#)" but added Corman "supported efforts to ban lawmakers from receiving gifts of cash and gift cards in years past."

For Pollack, the issue is simple: As long as legislators can accept cash and other gifts, they will be beholden to those with money and power. Those without means will remain unheard.

"I've never met anyone outside the state Capitol who thinks this is controversial," Pollack said.

[San Diego crashes its own campaign disclosure website](#) (California)

The city of San Diego's online campaign disclosure system, at one time a stellar model of electronic reporting, now appears to have lost a key vendor and been down for weeks without any public announcement, except for a note on the site that filings would return soon.

Calls to the city clerk's office, the city's ethics commission, and Netfile, the Mariposa-based online filing vendor that has run the city's disclosure portal for almost a decade, were not immediately returned.

A longtime professional campaign treasurer, who agreed to discuss the matter on background, said she had learned that the city's termination of its relationship with the vendor had been sudden and had come as a surprise.

"They didn't really give a lot of detail," according to this person. "[The city] told me they are not going to support Netfile anymore. When I contacted Netfile, they said the city didn't want to renew the contract."

An early effort to use electronic filing via Netfile stalled out in 2005 after the city manager questioned its then-estimated annual cost of \$40,000, but the City ultimately became one of the vendor's first clients.

"The city of San Diego made history with our campaign system, having the first-ever paperless campaign statement filed on January 2013," wrote Netfile vice president Tom Diebert in an April 6, 2020, letter to Garden Grove city clerk Terri Pomeroy.

"The city has an immediate need to continue its contractual relationship with the contractor to ensure that the city's constituents have uninterrupted access to electronic filing and review of disclosure documents required by the California Political Reform Act and the City of San Diego Ethics Ordinance," says a September 29, 2020 "amended and restated agreement" between Netfile and the city.

An ordinance approving the contract was passed by a unanimous city council vote on October 6 and signed by then-mayor Kevin Faulconer the same day.

The document calls for Netfile to "provide the services, in accordance with the agreed-upon schedule of fees, set forth in Exhibit B, from September 30, 2019, through April 30, 2021."

The contract says the arrangement can be extended "on the same terms and conditions, until September 30, 2021, or later date if the later date is mutually agreed upon by both Parties."

Fees "must not exceed \$75,000 for the period from September 30, 2019, through September 30, 2020, and \$81,250 for the period from October 1, 2020, through April 1, 2021, unless an increase is approved by the City's purchasing agent, mayor, or city council, as legally required."

What led city officials to dispense with Netfile in favor of what appears to be a home-grown filing and disclosure system remains a tightly held city hall secret.

The city's current make-shift system has been badly flawed, posting documents without timestamps and omitting years of vital campaign finance data furnished under Netflix, per recent users. The most recent filing as of Friday morning was dated May 13.

A link to what purported to be personal economic interest disclosure filings by city employees, required under state law, went instead to a lobbyist disclosure page.

Would-be electronic filers of campaign and lobbying disclosure reports were told, "filing Campaign Disclosures will be available on eFile-SD by June 2021."

In a subsequent telephone interview, Netfile vice president Diebert said his company bowed out of the competition for a new contract because city officials wanted would-be vendors to bundle a new lobbyist reporting system, with campaign and financial interest reporting modules.

"We wanted to end the life of the lobbyist platform that we had custom developed for them," he said. "We don't do one-offs. We were basically losing money."

Without the lobbyist reporting system requirement, Diebert estimated the contract for campaign and financial interest filings would have cost the city in the neighborhood of \$37,000.

"If it doesn't work out [with the new vendor], I told them we would like to have you back," Diebert said.

A spokeswoman for the city clerk's office who didn't want to be quoted said City Clerk Elizabeth Maland would be back in the office on Monday to provide further details, including whether historic data regarding previous campaign contributions provided by Netfile would be reposted online by the city's new vendor. She added a request for proposal and the final contract with a firm known as Pasadena Consulting were approved by the city council.

The spokeswoman added that during the outage of the reporting site, members of the public could still call the office and request copies of disclosure filings in PDF format.

Lobbyists were shut out of Nevada capitol. They went anyway. (Nevada)

The Nevada legislative building on Carson Street in the capital is where much of a lobbyist's work is done each session.

It is where government advocates frequently crisscross with lawmakers and other activists for impromptu interactions in hallways and during breaks in committee hearings.

But due to the pandemic, [the building was closed this year to the broader public](#), including lobbyists, from the Feb. 1 start of the session until April 15, [when it reopened with limitations](#).

Even so, Southern Nevadan governments paid tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars to send their lobbyists to Carson City despite having little to no physical access to lawmakers, according to data analyzed by the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

Government spending on travel and lodging illustrates the varying degrees in which officials believed their advocates would be effective in the capital.

The city of Henderson sent four lobbyists to Carson City through April 15 and spent more than \$48,000 on travel and lodging, data shows. It is about \$4,000 more than the city paid in those categories over the same period last session.

“Having staff on the ground in Carson City enhances effectiveness and ensures the City’s voice is heard when decisions are being made that can have lasting consequences on our community and those who live, work, learn and play in Henderson,” city spokeswoman Kathleen Richards said in a statement.

Richards said that limited physical access to the legislative building “has not kept the City’s lobby team from doing its job.”

Despite spending more on travel and lodging, the city’s overall lobbying expenses were down from 2019 when incorporating costs such as operations, contracts and fees, data shows.

The spending by local governments also demonstrates the difficulties of navigating a legislative session unlike any other in recent memory.

Las Vegas spent about \$23,000 on lodging and travel through April 15, less than during the same period in 2019, according to data.

But nearly all that money — \$21,350 — was paid to rent two rooms over five months at the St. Charles Hotel, which cost about \$3,400 more than three rooms rented by the city at a different hotel in 2019, records show.

City lobbyist Kelly Crompton said the hotel needed to be secured prior to the rules of the session being established.

“We at the time did not know what session was going to look like,” she said.

Pandemic altered typical lobbying

Crompton said none of the city’s work tracking hundreds of bills and fiscal notes had fallen through the cracks despite access constraints.

Fellow Las Vegas lobbyist Randy Robison acknowledged, however, it is difficult to say whether lobbyists have been as effective as they would have been in a normal cycle.

The pandemic forced lobbyists into coffee shops or restaurants to chat up lawmakers and fellow advocates, they said. Dozens of daily impromptu conversations that could normally be had walking with a legislator from a committee room to their office — the type of interactions that Robison said “really drive that advocacy” — had to be scheduled instead.

Lawmakers have been accommodating with such scheduling, they said.

The city typically sends all three of its lobbyists to Carson City, Crompton said. But through at least May 11, just one lobbyist had been making the trip up north while two stayed behind to work remotely.

The decisions on whether to fly to the capital — tickets are generally booked a month in advance — were based on scheduled committee hearings that the city wanted to attend, according to Crompton.

“There was definitely weeks where no one was there,” she said.

Records show that Las Vegas and Henderson each canceled and were refunded for several flights throughout mid-April.

Different approach, with tax dollars in mind

The city of North Las Vegas appeared to adopt the most conservative approach to the new constraints: It chose not to send lobbyist Jared Luke to the capital while the legislative building was closed.

Assistant City Manager Delen Goldberg said Luke was no less effective working remotely early in the session. She called the decision to keep him local a responsible use of taxpayer money.

“The only difference is, I would have been across the street on taxpayers’ dollars versus being in City Hall,” said Luke, the city’s government affairs director, who only came to Carson City for the first time in early May.

But Luke said even if he had traveled to the capital before this month, after-hours meetings were scarce because many lawmakers were not fully vaccinated. Seeing one or two of them at a restaurant, he said, would have been “the highlight of a week.”

The city said it spent nearly \$7,000 on all lobbying efforts through April 15. Those costs were attributed to staff time incurred by the government affairs team, according to the city. It is far less than it would spend in a normal year.

Clark County lobbyists were not available to be interviewed because they were too busy during legislative crunch time as the session wraps up next month, spokesman Erik Pappa said.

But two lobbyists had traveled to Carson City during the session, he said.

The nearly \$32,000 the county spent on travel, lodging and meals through April 15 paled in comparison to the \$201,000 it paid during the same period in 2019, according to data. The county also spent \$50,000 on contract lobbyists this session — a new expense from two years ago — yet it is unclear if any outside lobbyists traveled to the capital.

Zoom meetings cannot replace face-to-face

Even after the legislative building reopened, the change had not been immediately dramatic, with a “bit of access” but not free-flowing as normal, according to Crompton.

The larger shift, she said, is that there were simply more people in Carson City. And there remain days where she does not need to go inside.

After more than three months of lobbying during a pandemic, Luke said that virtual elements to the job are an attractive prospect for future sessions.

“Will it replace session? No,” he said. “Will it be a component of session and meetings moving forward? I think so because I think people have kind of warmed up to it and seen that it’s an effective tool.”

Yet Robison, who said the virtual legislative session had gone as smoothly as it could, was also clear that personal contact has been sorely missed.

“No Zoom meeting can ever replace a face-to-face and that’s true of this work or anybody’s workplace,” he said. “Now I think almost three months on, we’ve all kind of figured it out (and) realized what the shortcomings are and did our best to overcome that.”

Lawmaker, former treasurer committed fraud to get campaign money, feds say

(Connecticut)

A Connecticut state senator and his former campaign treasurer pleaded not guilty Tuesday to federal fraud charges alleging they lied to obtain public money to run a 2018 state legislative campaign.

Bridgeport Democratic Sen. Dennis Bradley and former school board Chairperson Jessica Martinez pleaded not guilty to wire fraud and conspiracy charges Tuesday afternoon. Bond was set at \$300,000 for Bradley and \$250,000 for Martinez.

Prosecutors allege that in order to qualify for the state's public campaign financing system, the pair lied about a March 2018 campaign event and the amount of campaign contributions they had received, according to a federal indictment.

They improperly received \$84,140 from the Connecticut Citizen's Election Fund for the 2018 Democratic primary and improperly sought to obtain another \$95,710 for the general election, prosecutors said.

"I think I can say it's very strong evidence against him," Assistant U.S. Attorney Jonathan Francis said in arguing for a high bond.

Bradley's attorney, Jim Glasser, said he had a very different view of the strength of the government's case.

Rocked by public corruption scandals, Connecticut passed a law in 2005 that created a voluntary system in which legislative and statewide candidates receive public funds to run their campaigns so long as they agree to strict rules about spending and fundraising.

They must collect a specific number of small contributions — \$5 to \$100 — from individuals, including many living in their districts, to qualify for the program and receive grants for their campaigns. Contributors cannot be lobbyists, or current or prospective state contractors, or their family members. The state sets a \$2,000 limit the expenditure of personal funds.

Bradley, among other things, is alleged to have used personal funds to pay a venue \$5,597.31 for the campaign event, and used personal funds for other campaign expenditures related to the event, including printed invitations and a band.

"Candidates for public office must be held to a high standard of conduct, especially when they apply for public funds for their campaigns," Acting U.S. Attorney Leonard Boyle said. "It is alleged that these defendants not only broke the rules at the outset of Mr. Bradley's first

campaign for the State Senate, but then engaged in an extensive cover up to conceal their illegal behavior and to receive additional public funds. The U.S. Attorney's Office and our FBI partners are committed to holding public officials to account.”

Bradley was elected in 2018 to represent the 23rd state Senate district, which includes Bridgeport. He was removed Tuesday as deputy majority leader and co-chairman of the General Assembly's Public Safety and Security Committee, which oversees issues ranging from police and fire training and emergency preparedness to state building codes and legalized gambling.

“Based on the current available information regarding Senator Bradley, I have taken a first step to protect the integrity of the State Senate,” State Senate President Pro Tempore Martin Looney said.

Bradley's seat is the same one held by former state Sen. Ernest Newtown, who pleaded guilty in federal court on September 20, 2005, to charges of bribery, mail fraud and evasion and federal income taxes and served four years in prison. In 2019, Newton pleaded guilty to three felony campaign finance violations in an unrelated case involving the public campaign financing system. The Connecticut State Supreme Court later overturned his convictions, ordering a new trial.

The Senate was expected to consider a major gambling and sports betting bill on Tuesday. Typically, the committee co-chairman would lead that debate. State Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, named as Bradley's temporary replacement pending disposition of the charges, is expected to fill in.

Bradley, a 37-year-old lawyer, also served as chairman on the Bridgeport Board of Education from 2015 to 2019.

Martinez, 39, still serves on the Bridgeport school board after being removed as chairperson last year, the Connecticut Post reported.

Jury selection was preliminarily set for Aug. 2.

