



M U L T I S T A T E

[Jon Lender: Despite COVID-19, legislators and PACs still put the touch on lobbyists, others for contributions; but now the touch is virtual](#)

Stay home, stay safe, send money.

Even during the coronavirus pandemic, life has certain imperatives — which for regular people consist of air, water and food, and for political people include vendettas, votes and financial contributions.

That final imperative, the contributions, is this week's Government Watch focus. It's become clear that while the coronavirus has shut down nations and states, it can't stop the machinery of political fundraising whether in the presidential campaign or down at the level of Connecticut General Assembly candidates and PACs.

And, just as experts now say that viruses adapt during a pandemic, so do political fundraising methods.

Here's an email that went out Tuesday — under the subject "Virtual Fundraiser" — from Deputy House Majority Leader Jeff Currey, D-East Hartford: "CURREY PAC was hoping to host a summer fundraiser, but in light of our social distancing efforts, I'd like to offer some 1-on-1 time, via Zoom."

"To donate, click the link below. If you would also like to schedule a 1:1 virtual chat, please reply to this email with the preferred time noted below," Currey told email recipients — who included past contributors and paid lobbyists who ply the hallways of the state Capitol. They work on behalf of businesses and other organizations seeking to realize gains, or avoid losses, resulting from legislative or executive action.

Two days after sending the email, Currey told The Courant that he already had "four or five" virtual chats lined up for June 9, a Tuesday on which he has established two time brackets for one-on-one Zoom sessions, noon to 2 p.m. and 4 to 6 p.m.

The one-on-one conversations seemed like a better idea than having a group Zoom session, because most people don't care about the other guy's issue, Currey said. "This seemed like a good test guinea pig ... It was just something that we came up with to see how to move forward in the age of corona."

The "link below" that Currey said to click on is one that all fundraising emails have in common — a form for your credit card number and personal information including name, address, and whether you call into categories where legal restrictions apply. Those include whether you're a "principal of a state contractor or prospective state contractor," or you're a lobbyist.

PACs such as Currey's dole out what they collect to local candidates, political committees and causes they're aligned with.

Session ends, emails begin

Currey isn't the only one to have sent out fundraising emails since May 6, when a small group of legislators gathered in a near-empty state Capitol to officially close 2020's regular session of the General Assembly. (May 6 was a key date, fundraising-wise, because lobbyists, who are big cash cows for legislative candidates and their political action committees, are banned by state law from making such contributions while the legislature is in session.)

On May 7, the day after the legislative session was adjourned, state House Minority Leader Vincent Candelora, R-North Branford, sent this email to his caucus' regular contributors and the usual list of lobbyists: "Ordinarily, we'd be writing you today with details about a post-session fundraiser. [But] it's unclear when we'll be able to hold such an event. You've been generous with your support in the past, and if you're in a position to contribute online now we'd certainly appreciate it."

He included links for contributions to three House Republican caucus leadership PACs, the House Republican Campaign Committee, New Friends PAC, and New Horizons PAC.

All four legislative caucuses (Democrats and Republicans in both the House and Senate) are allowed by law to have multiple PACS run by their leaders.

"I think less money is being raised," said Candelora, who is expected to succeed Rep. Themis Klarides as House Republican leader when she retires from legislative service in January. "We're not able to get into communities and hold events. People are social creatures, and they'll come to

a fundraiser and make a \$50 donation, have a glass of wine and an appetizer, and then go home.”

Now, he said, both Republicans’ candidates’ and caucus’ committees can’t expect to seek or receive as much from people who may have lost their jobs since the last time around.

Meanwhile, on May 13, Rep. Rick Lopes, D-New Britain, wrote this email to potential supporters and lobbyists on behalf of his candidate’s committee for the Nov. 3 election: “I am beginning to get into full swing on my campaign to win the 6th Senatorial seat for New Britain, Berlin and Farmington. I am hoping you can help me out with a donation to qualify for the state election grant. So much remains to be done to ensure that the residents of the 6th district have a Senator who is responsive the needs and interests that are important to people struggling with the pandemic and day to day life.

“Please use the link below to donate online or respond to me that you want a form to mail in with a donation. As always, thank you for your support and trust.”

Lopes said his fundraising efforts stopped for a while, after a decent beginning in February, and now he’s trying to pick them up again — although in a different form than usual.

“I love to go out and knock on doors and talk to people. That’s been the strength of my campaigns,” Lopes said Thursday. “You knock on somebody’s door once, and then you do it again 18 years later, and you usually start the conversation where it left off the last time. They remember you forever.”

But he said now he is having to rely on phone calling, along with social media, online ads, email and direct mail. (The phone calling is more time-consuming than it used to be, he said. People who’ve been staying home and social distancing welcome the chance to talk to somebody outside their household; he says he’s averaging 21 minutes per call.)

In order to qualify for a grant of about \$80,000 through the state’s public-campaign-financing program, Lopes needs to about \$16,000 in small contributions up to a maximum of \$270, and 300 of those donations must come from within the Senate district (in which he’s trying to unseat Sen. Gennaro Bizzarro, R-New Britain, who beat him in a special election last year).

“It’s harder because we can’t do a big [fundraising] event,” he said, adding that for now, “we’re going under the assumption” that the state won’t open up fully for normal public activities until after the election. Lopes said he’s about halfway toward qualifying for the taxpayer-funded grant that’s administered by the State Elections Enforcement Commission.

Lobbyists limited

Collecting money from lobbyists, by the way, is a notable exception to the general philosophy of the state clean-election laws of which the public-financing grant program is a part.

Those laws, and the ban on lobbyists' contributions during the legislative session, are designed to keep special interests from influencing government decisions.

The clean-election laws were passed in response to the corruption scandal that drove John Rowland from the governor's office and into federal prison 15 years ago. However, the concern about lobbyists' influence disappears, for some reason, if a lobbyist's contribution gets to a legislator the day before or after the session, according to the laws (which were created by the legislators who run the PACs and campaign for re-election.)

Lobbyists are limited to donating \$100 a year per candidate or PAC, but there are lots of candidates and PACs. Also, lobbying firms and their clients constantly have been solicited over the years to purchase an "advertisement" costing up to \$250 in an "ad book" that gets printed for display at a live PAC fundraising event. Hardly anyone ever reads those books, which are filled with messages of "congratulations" or "best wishes" to the caucus or PAC leader involved.

Lobbyists won't talk about these things publicly, but privately [they say that they feel a need to donate to legislators and their PACs out of concern that if they don't, they and their clients might get frozen out](#) by a legislator or powerful caucus leader. They grumble, but generally accept it as a cost of working the Capitol.

When asked about that, legislators and caucus leaders always say the same thing — that contributions don't influence their official decisions.

Asked this week about it, Candelora said, "In my experience, I have not seen a quid pro quo with donations from lobbyists," adding that "obviously, they are going to want to give equally to every party because they don't want to be accused of political bias."

Lopes said, "It's nothing" to do with having better access or influence. "A good lobbyist understands the role" of advocating for a client or cause, and understands that "you'd be risking your entire profession" by seeking a legislative favor in exchange for a contribution.

Currey said, "There's not a quid pro quo," and it's "not even part of the conversation."

[**The coronavirus forces face-to-face politics online**](#)

The pandemic has made political campaigns a little less visible and a lot less personal.

Political flyers aren't hanging from our front doorknobs. Town hall meetings are held on computer screens now, cutting down on the cost of cupcakes and on many of the benefits of public discussions in big rooms. Fundraisers that would typically move smoothly from a candidate speech to a check and a handshake are now held online, with links for donors who want to send electronic contributions and add their names to hyperactive email lists.

Most Texas candidates aren't busy campaigning for votes right now; most have secured their nominations and are preparing for the November general election. But candidates in Democratic and Republican Party runoffs are prepping for a July 14 election preceded by two weeks of early voting starting June 29. There's also a special state Senate election in Central Texas on the ballot.

Winning voters' attention for a runoff election, especially in the middle of the summer, is a tough proposition. The pandemic and other national news crowds out state and local political conversations. The runoff electorate is a smaller civic herd to begin with. That makes it easier to contact likely voters, but critical to get them to the polls — and to make sure they know a candidate's name when they get there.

“Pandemic changed expectations about what a field campaign should be,” says Pritesh Gandhi, who's in a runoff with Mike Siegel to pick the Democratic challenger to U.S. Rep. Mike McCaul, R-Austin. A candidate still has to do all of the normal things — talk to people, win their favor, attract their votes, maybe collect some donations. But everything that used to be done in person now has the word “virtual” in front of it.

Gandhi does what he calls “virtual block walking,” using the phone instead of his feet to go door to door. “Virtual events have been the best-attended events of the campaign,” he says, comparing his runoff campaign with the one that preceded the March primary.

The details of what works and what's different depend on the race. Statewide candidates don't campaign door to door in the way that state House, state Senate or congressional candidates do. The state's too big, and time is too short.

Individual contact with voters is done electronically and by mail and — when it's time to vote — sometimes by phone. But the town hall meetings around the state that would give voters a chance to see candidates in the flesh aren't happening, says Chrysta Castañeda, a Democrat running for an open seat on the Texas Railroad Commission. Her opponent in July is former state Rep. Roberto Alonzo of Dallas; the winner will face Republican Jim Wright, [who upset](#) Railroad Commissioner [Ryan Sitton](#) in the March primary.

That commission, which regulates the state's oil and gas industry, isn't well known. Candidates of both political parties struggle to get attention — especially when there's a flashy presidential race at the top of the ballot to distract voters. Castañeda says the collapse in the price of oil and the state of the economy have turned up the volume, but the July elections still aren't the subject of everyday conversation in the state.

“It's surprising how quickly we're converting to a virtual campaign, and it's more efficient than what I was doing,” she says. Flying around the state to town hall meetings and fundraisers has been replaced by virtual events that each have attracted 30 to 100 voters.

The delay in the runoff election — originally scheduled for May but pushed to July in the face of the pandemic — hasn't given any candidates an advantage, in Gandhi's estimation.

“April was a dead month,” he says. “It was lost for everyone.”

Things have picked up considerably. This is normally the season for Austin fundraising events, where candidates from all over Texas seeking state offices go to the state capital to raise money from lobbyists and special interest groups, often in a kind of serial check-harvesting operation held in adjacent rooms at a historic opera house now known as the Austin Club.

That's not happening. Zoom is happening. It's a way to hear from a candidate and to prompt like-minded or self-interested donors to send money. But it doesn't build relationships the same way. Live fundraisers give donors and candidates a chance to meet in a way that's not possible when the audience is a grid of faces on a computer screen.

The July runoffs are a trial run for the November general election. Voters will be wearing masks and carrying hand sanitizer, just like the election judges who handle their ballots. The courts are still deciding how many of those voters will be allowed to vote by mail. But the changes are on the other side, too, where candidates are trying to figure out how to connect with people they can't see face to face, to build communities of people they've never actually met.