



M U L T I S T A T E

Education groups lead in spending on lobbyists in Maryland

Two groups advocating for education and the Maryland Jockey Club were among the organizations that spent the most on lobbyists in Maryland in the most recent reporting period, when major legislation affecting them was before state lawmakers.

The spending on lobbying reported to the State Ethics Commission this week came at a time when state lawmakers in the last legislative session approved a far-reaching education funding measure and a plan to rebuild the Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore that involved Laurel Park in Anne Arundel County.

Strong Schools Maryland spent about \$559,600 between Nov. 1 and April 30. That was the highest amount spent on lobbying by one group. The Maryland State Education Association, the state's teachers' union representing more than 74,000 educators and school employees in the state's public schools, spent the second-highest amount on lobbyists: \$516,558.

While the General Assembly adjourned in March almost three weeks early in their annual 90-day session this year due to the coronavirus, lawmakers focused on approving top-priority legislation in the waning days.

The K-12 education measure, known as the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, focuses on five policy areas, which include expanding early childhood education and increasing teacher salaries. College and career readiness, aid for struggling schools and accountability in implementation also are among the main policy areas.

The bill, which would gradually be phased in and cost an additional \$4 billion in fiscal year 2030, was vetoed by Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican who cited its huge cost and the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. The General Assembly, which is controlled by Democrats, passed the bill with enough votes to override the veto the next time the legislature meets, now scheduled for January.

The \$389 million plan to rebuild Pimlico, with the goal of keeping the Preakness in Baltimore, went into law without the governor's signature. The Maryland Jockey Club spent about \$470,213 on lobbying, the fourth-highest amount.

Johns Hopkins spent \$481,756, the third-highest amount reported.

While the pandemic prompted lawmakers to leave Annapolis early, the shortened session did not have a major impact on the salaries of most top-earning lobbyists, compared to the year before.

Gerry Evans was again on top, reporting \$2.3 million. Bruce Bereano was second, with \$1.6 million. Tim Perry reported nearly \$1.5 million. Lisa Jones, Frank Boston and Michael Johansen reported roughly \$1.1 million each.

[**NRA lobbyist Marion Hammer to face ethics commission hearing**](#)

Florida's top gun lobbyist Marion Hammer faces a probable cause hearing next week before the Florida Commission on Ethics regarding her failure to disclose hundreds of thousands of dollars in payments from the National Rifle Association.

State Sen. Perry Thurston, D-Fort Lauderdale, filed sworn complaints about Hammer with the Florida Senate and the ethics commission in May 2019. Two weeks before, Florida Bulldog reported the NRA paid Hammer hundreds of thousands of dollars that she had not disclosed for a decade on quarterly lobbyist compensations reports required by the Legislature.

Hammer largely skated past the Senate last year, when Lizbeth Benacquisto, a Republican political ally from Fort Myers who chairs the Senate Rules Committee, ignored Senate rules for how to conduct an investigation and instead steered the matter for "review" to a lawyer at the Office of Legislative Services, an entity under the control of Senate President Bill Galvano.

State law says the fine for late reports is "\$50 per day per report for each late day up to a maximum of \$5,000 per late report." Hammer, however, wasn't fined or otherwise disciplined. Instead, the lawyer told her to amend only four years of lobbyist registration records to show that she was employed by the "lobbying firm" Unified Sportsmen of Florida to represent the NRA before the Legislature. Hammer, who complied, is Unified Sportsmen's \$110,000-a-year executive director.

State Rep. Anna Eskamani, D-Orlando, who filed a similar complaint in the House, told the Sun-Sentinel she suspected Hammer had gotten special treatment. "A fine would have been a

modest but positive decision,” she said. “If it was any other lobbyist who faced the same kind of complaint, I think the results would have been different.”

‘Not a pretty picture’

Thurston told the Tampa Bay Times the outcome showed “the power of the National Rifle Association in the Florida Legislature.”

“It is not a pretty picture,” he said.

Now, Hammer faces another official inquiry, albeit before a quasi-judicial agency with a reputation as a paper tiger.

The Ethics Commission’s probable cause hearing will be held in person on July 24 at 10 a.m. in the third-floor courtroom of the First District Court of Appeal in Tallahassee. Because Hammer did not waive her right to confidentiality, the public and press will be excluded.

Hammer and her attorney, Richard Coates, and the prosecutor, called the “Commission Advocate,” will get 10 minutes each to make statements to the [nine-member commission](#).

“No witnesses may be called at this hearing and no new evidence may be introduced,” says a “confidential” notification letter obtained by Florida Bulldog. “The sole purpose of the probable cause hearing is to evaluate the results of the preliminary investigation.”

Ethics commission

Commission Executive Director Chris Anderson ordered the inquiry after finding the complaint was legally sufficient. The preliminary investigation determines whether probable cause exists that an accused – in this case Hammer – violated Florida’s Code of Ethics. The commission’s staff investigates and writes a report, which is forwarded to the Commission Advocate, an assistant attorney general who represents the commission. The Advocate makes a recommendation as to whether there is probable cause to believe that there has been an ethics violation.

If the commission finds no probable cause to believe a violation occurred, the complaint will be dismissed. If the commission finds probable cause, a public hearing—similar to a trial—will be held before a state administrative law judge unless the two sides can reach an agreement. The complaint becomes public if probable cause is determined.

Florida Bulldog reported in May 2019 that Hammer received \$270,000 from the NRA “for consulting services and legislative lobbying in Florida” in the wake of the 2018 Parkland school massacre. She was paid another \$134,000 in 2017 “for legislative lobbying services in Florida.” Neither of those payments, described in internal NRA documents, was disclosed on the required quarterly lobbyist compensation reports.

Further, NRA tax returns show that Hammer received \$147,000 in 2014, \$172,000 in 2015 and \$206,000 in 2016. The 2014-2018 totals: \$929,000. None of it was reported to state lobbyist regulators, and, while Hammer is a registered lobbyist in the capital she has not filed any compensation reports since at least 2007.

When the initial Florida Bulldog story was published, Sen. Thurston said, “Florida’s lobbying disclosure law was passed in 2005 to give citizens more insight into the forces driving the legislative process. The National Rifle Association has had an outsized influence on the passage of pro-gun bills for more than two decades. Floridians have a right to know just how much money was driving that agenda, and why those payments were never disclosed.”

[Hot zone? Florida Republicans told to ‘get tested’ after lobbyist who attended their fundraiser now positive for coronavirus](#)

A Florida lobbyist who attended a recent Republican fundraiser near Jacksonville has tested positive for COVID-19.

The lobbyist attended a reception at the Ponte Vedra Inn and Club on Thursday.

House Speaker-designate Chris Sprowls confirmed the situation.

“I have called every member present and we are in the process of calling every attendee to notify them. We are encouraging all of them to self-quarantine and/or get tested as soon as possible. While there were precautions made available, further gatherings in the near future have been canceled,” Sprowls said.

Among those in attendance were Sprowls, future House Speaker Paul Renner, Reps. Cord Byrd, Wyman Duggan, Elizabeth Fetterhoff, Jason Fischer, Tom Leek and Clay Yarborough as well as House District 18 candidate Sam Garrison and a handful of lobbyists.

“Yesterday, I was informed an individual at an event I attended last week subsequently tested positive for Covid. This morning, I was tested and am thankful to announce my results are

negative. Jordan and our family continue to pray for the positive individual and other attendees,” Yarborough tweeted Tuesday.

The infected lobbyist told Florida Politics that they woke up Sunday with COVID-19 symptoms. They were confirmed positive after being rapid-tested Monday.

Another lobbyist who briefly attended the event and asked to remain anonymous told Florida Politics that they left after entering the reception and seeing no one wearing masks.

Some attendees also attended an event Saturday with Vice President Mike Pence where he thanked members of the Republican National Host Committee for their work on the Jacksonville event.

Byrd attended the fundraising reception on Thursday and then the Pence event on Saturday.

Photos from the Saturday event show that not every guest was wearing a mask and social distancing was not in place, at least not exclusively. A photo with Byrd shows him with attendees shoulder to shoulder with no masks.

Organizers of the RNC event say precautions were taken.

“The host committee temperature checked, provided masks in the health screening tent, encouraged guests to wear them inside and socially distanced the space into 6-foot grids for guests,” said Erin Isaac, spokesperson for the RNC Host Committee.

Senate President-designate Wilton Simpson confirmed to Florida Politics that two fundraisers which had been on the books — one in Naples and another in Pebble Beach — had been previously canceled out of an abundance of caution. A spokesperson for Simpson said Monday night that future events will continue to be evaluated as the coronavirus outbreak dictates.

This isn’t the first time lawmakers have had a scare.

Byrd was among three lawmakers who temporarily self-isolated during this year’s Legislative Session in early March after they attended the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, where another attendee was later diagnosed with the virus. Rep. Anthony Sabatini and Thad Altman also isolated after the event.

Republican Rep. Byron Donalds and House Democratic Leader Kionne McGhee also self-isolated after attending the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference where three attendees later tested positive.

Those self-isolations led to a temporary House floor recess to sanitize desktops and surfaces.

For other lawmakers, the scare culminated in a positive test result.

Rep. Shevrin Jones, who is currently mounting a campaign for Senate, announced earlier this month he had tested positive. Jones' parents and older brother have also tested positive.

U.S. Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart and Miami Mayor Francis Suarez also contracted the virus early on in the outbreak.

And on Monday, Palm Beach County State Attorney Dave Aronberg and Palm Beach County Property Appraiser Dorothy Jacks both announced they had tested positive.