



M U L T I S T A T E

[Denver launches next phase of campaign finance and disclosure database](#) (Denver, CO)

With the November general election approaching and all of Colorado's executive officers up for election, the Denver Clerk and Recorder's office has launched the second phase of a searchable campaign finance and disclosure database.

SearchLight Denver provides residents access to lobbying organizations, individual lobbyists and their efforts around city matters.

The new system replaces an outdated system and is designed to allow Denver residents to be better informed on lobbying efforts.

"A priority for my administration is to ensure the public has access to better understand who is influencing legislation and city businesses," Clerk and Recorder Paul Lopez said. "SearchLight Denver phase two builds upon the systems data transparency by adding lobbyist disclosure functionality, and we will continue to provide additional access to the public."

To create SearchLight Denver, Lopez's office is partnering with MapLight, a technology nonprofit specializing in campaign finance tools and lobbying for state and municipal governments.

The third phase of SearchLight Denver, expected to go live later this year, will expand the tool's capabilities to include an ethics portal. The added functionality will feature an index of lobbyist information and financial disclosures. Phase three also includes Spanish translation of the site.

[Campaign finance case against nonprofits that raised money for Stacey Abrams in 2018 headed for trial](#) (Georgia)

The [State Ethics Commission](#) found probable cause that two nonprofit groups in 2018 raised and spent millions to support Democratic candidates, including Stacey Abrams.

Under [Georgia](#) law, groups campaigning for candidates must disclose how much they raise and how they spend it.

Critics said politics is at play.

"We're happy the facts in evidence have now come to light," said Ethics Commission Director David Emadi.

Emadi is pleased the commission voted to proceed with the campaign finance case against a nonprofit organization founded by Abrams.

"We think it's good for [Georgia](#) voters to know who is bankrolling their elections and how they are trying to influence them," Emadi said.

However, the chairman of that nonprofit [New Georgia Project](#), Francys Johnson, said this is all election year game playing

Reporter: "Are you saying all this is political?"

Johnson: "I'm saying this is off-off-off-Broadway. In the smoky halls of this legislative building, a predestined conclusion was reached today."

The State Ethics Commission staff filed a complaint against a nonprofit group founded by Abrams called New Georgia Project and a second nonprofit group the commission called a separate but affiliated organization, the New Georgia Project Action Fund. The complaint alleges the two non-profits raised and spent some \$7 million in support of a slate of Democratic candidates including Abrams during the 2018 gubernatorial election.

New Georgia Project lawyer Ari Branch argued the two nonprofits are not required by law to disclose who donated to their nonprofits or what they spent money on.

"It's not that we are trying to hide who supports these organizations," said Branch.

Ethics Commission General Counsel Joe Cusack countered with a PowerPoint presentation outlining how those nonprofits canvased neighborhoods, handing out at least 170,000 flyers supporting Democratic candidates, including Abrams.

"It comes down to canvassing, electioneering, phone banking, and texting and trying to influence voters," Emadi told reporters.

The commission appeared to agree, unanimously voting to find sufficient probable cause to continue the campaign finance case. A case, New Georgia Project Chairman Francys Johnson said they will be glad to battle.

"This is just a preliminary hearing. We still have to go through a hearing, and we're going to fight all the way," said Johnson.

The case is headed for a full bench trial before an administrative law judge, but first, State Ethics Commission lawyers are expected to take depositions of key players.

One staffer told FOX 5, the case will more than likely not go to trial until after the election.

Florida Power & Light operates an exclusive, invite-only lounge for lawmakers and lobbyists (Florida)

Consider it Tallahassee's version of the fabled smoke-filled backroom.

Florida Power & Light, one of the state's most politically powerful companies, operates an event space located on the third floor of the company's \$2 million, 13,000 square foot downtown Tallahassee offices. The building is nondescript and includes no signs that would indicate it's owned by one of the largest power companies in the country. The third floor of the building, where the bar is located, has a series of large shutters that make its outdoor patio area impossible to see from the street level.

The exclusive lounge is used by company officials to host lobbyists and the lawmakers whose votes they need, according to more than six people familiar with the space.

"I have been invited to meetings and events at their offices and I follow the gift laws," said state Rep. David Silvers (D-Lake Clarke Shores).

Florida Power & Light confirmed they utilize the space following inquiries by POLITICO.

"Just like many other companies, trade associations and other organizations in Tallahassee, NextEra Energy, FPL's parent company, pays for a private meeting place in the city that's used

for internal and external company functions,” said Chris McGrath, a spokesperson for Florida Power & Light. “This space has been used for a number of years and all external functions conducted in the space are done in accordance with applicable laws.”

“Any applicable costs are paid for by NextEra Energy — not FPL customers,” he added.

Revelations of the party space, which has not previously been reported, come as the company is mired in scandals over its aggressive approach to lobbying and public advocacy. Among the most recent disclosures: The company tried to covertly influence state elections and set up news sites to attack critics and further its political agenda.

Six people who have visited the bar on multiple occasions describe it as one of the nicest venues in the city’s downtown, which is lined with upscale lounges that cater to the political class. Yet Florida Power & Light’s venue remains all-but unknown to the general public.

Several of the people said it’s frequented by powerful lawmakers and staff, most of whom are considered backers of FPL’s legislative agenda and are responsible for crafting legislation directly involving Florida Power & Light. They were granted anonymity to discuss the event space because they feared speaking out against the powerful company. Some work on Florida Power & Light’s contract lobbying team and are not authorized to speak to the media.

“That’s its purpose, it’s the ‘friends of the FPL program’ that are invited,” said one person who has attended the bar multiple times. “If you’re there you probably are already with them.”

State Rep. Anna Eskamani (D-Orlando), one of FPL’s biggest critics, said the energy company’s exclusive lounge raises concerns that Florida Power & Light is illicitly influencing lawmakers and violating the state’s gift ban and open meetings laws, which require public notice of gatherings when lawmakers discuss legislative business.

“I don’t understand why any electricity company needs a private, invite-only lounge for lawmakers that is next to the Florida Capitol,” Eskamani said. “Not only could this be a serious violation of Sunshine Laws and the legislature gift ban, but it all feeds into our collective concern that FPL uses corrupt business practices to influence politicians, buy out media outlets, and undermine democracy.”

“All while increasing utility rates on consumers,” she added.

One lobbyist who has been to the bar on multiple occasions described the location as having a “high-end fully stocked bar, big TV, fireplace I believe, a bunch of plush leather couches and a

mix of FPL employees, lobbyists and legislators.” The bar itself is 1,278 square feet, and the space includes a separate 548 square foot lounge and an additional outdoor bar, according to city blueprints of the building reviewed by POLITICO.

State Rep. Randy Fine (R-Palm Bay) said he has been to FPL’s bar but disagrees that it’s swankier than other bars. He said it’s just a place for people to talk mostly about politics in private.

“I have been there, yes, but there are lots of groups that have stuff like this,” Fine said. “When you are in Tallahassee and want to meet with folks, your options are limited and extremely limited to talk about politics. If I want to talk about legislation, I can invite people to my office, but it’s different with politics. You have to go to their offices.”

He said there is usually a container at the location for guests to slip in money, and he “always pays.”

Florida Power & Light and its affiliates don’t have a liquor license at the location, according to a spokesperson for the Department of Business and Professional Regulation, which regulates state liquor licenses.

McGrath, the FPL spokesman, did not respond to follow-up questions about whether there is a policy or requirement to ensure visitors and others adhere to Florida’s gift ban, which prohibits lobbyists from providing drinks, food or entertainment to lawmakers or their staff. He also would not answer questions about whether FPL has a liquor license, which would be needed to sell liquor.

Some of those who have been to the location said they understand there is the appearance of a conflict of interest with one of the state’s political and lobbying giants providing drinks to elected officials in an invite-only location.

“You build the nicest bar in downtown, privately bring legislators in there to a stocked bar and rely on the honor system with a publicly traded investor owned utility and block press and normal people from being there,” said a second person who has visited the space.

One person said that other companies have private venues to host lawmakers, but none with the size or scope of FPL’s venue, which requires an employee swipe card to access the space. The Ballard Partners lobbying practice, for example, has a patio area on a building it owns. The Florida Association of Realtors also has a location where people gather. But those venues don’t

require a swipe card to access, the second person said. Both of the locations are well known to lobbyists.

Over the past few months, a series of leaked documents have revealed how FPL influences both the political and media landscapes. Reporting led by the Miami Herald, Orlando Sentinel and Floodlight have shown how consultants that work closely with Florida Power & Light [used shadow groups](#) and waves of money to influence both state and local elections. The company also took a [controlling stake in an online news site](#) that it used to help boost its priorities and bash political opponents.

In at least one case, the energy company had a private investigator [follow a Florida Times-Union reporter](#) who had written several articles framing FPL parent company NextEra Energy's attempt to buy a local community-owned utility in an unfavorable light.

Florida Power & Light has denied any wrongdoing connected to the media reports and said that the work is the product of a consulting firm it employs that had gone rogue. But the rapid succession of negative headlines is starting to take a toll. Investment firm Seaport Global downgraded its assessment of NextEra from "buy" to "neutral," citing "growing media scrutiny." And Tampa Democratic Rep. Kathy Castor has asked the Department of Justice to investigate Florida Power & Light over its attempts to influence the state's politics.

The company has long been influential in the state Capitol.

Florida Power & Light drafted legislation, FL HB741 (22R), during the 2022 legislative session that would have reduced and eventually eliminated payments to solar rooftop owners. Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis vetoed the bill because of language a separate energy company, Duke Energy Florida, supported in the measure that would allow utilities to charge all customers for costs imposed by rooftop solar. DeSantis said he expects the proposal to return next session.

Opposition from utilities this year also helped stall a bill, FL SB920 (22R), that would have prevented utilities from charging customers for installing electric vehicle charging stations. Gas station owners remain worried about utilities having an unfair entry into the burgeoning market.

FPL strongly backed 2019 legislation, along with other utilities, that allows them to charge customers for fortifying the electrical grid against storms. Lawmakers passed that legislation. Utilities earlier this year filed plans seeking \$24 billion over 10 years for replacing poles and other grid hardening activities.

“If this is true, it would obviously give Florida Power & Light a big advantage when it comes to access and influence with lawmakers,” said Ben Wilcox, research director with Integrity Florida of the FPL lounge. “It sounds like a new twist on the smoke-filled backroom deal-making of Florida’s past.”