



M U L T I S T A T E

[W.Va. expected to see nation's strongest campaign finance reform bill in January](#)

A candidate for West Virginia House of Delegates is pledging to support the strictest campaign finance legislation in the nation, and more than 50 other candidates in Mountain State races have pledged their support, too.

The bill, which a group of legislators are expected to introduce in Charleston in January, aims to break the "cycle of legalized corruption" in U.S. government that was identified in a 2014 study by researchers from Princeton University and Northwestern University, which found that from 2009 to 2014, the 200 most politically active companies in the U.S. spent \$5.8 billion influencing the government with lobbying and campaign contributions.

Those same companies got \$4.4 trillion in taxpayer support — earning a return of 750 times their investment, the study found.

Selina Vickers, who is running for the District 32 seat, has pledged not to accept any corporate money. On Thursday, she and other candidates met with residents in Minden, a contaminated Fayette County neighborhood where a large number of residents report cancers, to pledge support for campaign finance reform.

The bill is part of West Virginia Can't Wait, which aims to win a "people's government" in West Virginia.

Standing with a mountain silhouetted in the background and a burned-out lot and flood-damaged home behind her, Vickers said that, if elected, she wants to pass the "end of buying elections" in the state.

"We have elected representatives that are so arrogant and smug that they won't even meet with their constituents," she said. "They won't take time to listen to them, either during their legislative session, or when they come home.

"But, they're fine with meeting with people who agree with them and who give them the large campaign contributions.

"What about everyone else?"

Under the "West Virginia Can't Wait to End the Buying of Elections" plan, lobbyists would be charged a fee. The fee would fund public elections in all state races, and out-of-state lobbyists would pay the "lion's share."

The plan caps self-funding by all candidates at \$1,000 and requires all candidates and lawmakers to submit income tax filings and to post their donor lists publicly in their offices and on legislature websites.

"How would that be?" Vickers asked on Thursday. "You show up to ask your legislator to help you because your water is poisoned, only to see that a sign on their door showing how much money they've taken from the company doing the poisoning.

"That would be helpful to know, wouldn't it?"

The plan also calls for a lifetime ban on lobbyists becoming legislators. And it would make it illegal for a legislator to serve as a lobbyist.

"This is not only legal now, it happens," noted Vickers. "

Vickers cited a 2014 study by professors from Princeton University and Northwestern University which aimed to answer the question, "Does the government represent the people?"

The study found that public opinion has "near zero" impact on U.S. law.

"Corruption is legal," researchers wrote.

According to the study, only money influences the government of Americans.

"While the opinions of the bottom 90 percent of income earners in America have a 'statistically non-significant impact,' economic elites, business interests, and people who can afford lobbyists still carry major influence," researchers noted. "As the cost of winning elections explodes, politicians of both political parties become ever more dependent on the tiny slice of the population who can bankroll their campaigns."

The study found that to win a Senate seat in 2014, candidates had to raise \$14,351 every single day.

"Just .05 percent of Americans donate more than \$10,000 in any election, so it's perfectly clear who candidates will turn to first, and who they're indebted to when they win," researchers wrote. "In return for campaign donations, elected officials pass laws that are good for their mega-donors, and bad for the rest of us."

Vickers said the proposed changes to campaign finance would put West Virginia at the forefront of campaign reform in the nation.

Annetta Coffman, 45, also spoke in favor of Vickers' plan.

Coffman grew up in Minden, home to a Superfund site that was placed on the United States Department of Environmental Protection (EPA) National Priorities List due to contamination by the carcinogen PCB. A large number of Minden residents and former residents report cancers and other illnesses, which they believe is due to PCB exposure.

EPA officials botched clean-up efforts repeatedly in Minden since the 1980s. The agency added Minden to NPL after a public outcry from residents and politicians, once the information was published by local and national media outlets.

Minden properties have also been targeted for arson, with around 68 properties being burned down in the past 10 years. No arrests have been made.

Coffman was forced to abandon her home when a recent flood caused extensive damage, including black mold. She now rents in Oak Hill.

She believes that campaign finance changes will encourage politicians to take seriously the concerns of those who do not live in privileged neighborhoods.

"My location is just one of many where people were affected," she said. "It's Minden.

"People don't take us serious. We've been called crazy, that we should just shut up, because we're going to make the issues worse.

"But you can't make it worse, unless you stay silent," she added. "That's why I've always been vocal about Minden.

"That's why I'll always be vocal about Minden."

She added that many residents of Minden are educated, intelligent people but that they are ignored because they live in a poorer community. She said that residents of Page in Fayette County, who recently marched because their drinking water is brown, are facing a similar situation in which their needs are being ignored.

"I think, in richer communities, it'd be like, 'Let's run a fresh water line to these people. Let's get this done,' but because people are poor...they're put on the back burner.

"It's not right," said Coffman. "It's absolutely not fair, and it's time that ends."

Vickers said that if residents of Minden had had more money, local and state politicians would have taken their concerns more seriously.

Under the proposed campaign finance changes, the average citizen would have as much influence in government as billionaires and corporations.

Vickers said the goal is for everyone's concerns to be heard, equally.

"Big corporations and wealthy donors, even people who don't live in West Virginia, are allowed to give thousands of dollars to a candidate, write a bill that they want, make an appointment and hand it to them and have a good possibility of getting it passed," said Vickers. "Do you think the people in this community could do that.

"If they could've done it, the industrial waste would have been cleaned up and long gone, or they would've been bought out and living somewhere else."

Citizen and Fayette County native Jean Evansmore said that she had first heard of Minden's PCB plight when she lived in Rhode Island in the 1980s. When she moved back in the 1990s, she said, the people of Minden were still fighting federal, state and local officials for help with environmental contamination and illnesses.

Vickers was joined by Mary Ann Claytor, a certified public accountant (CPA), who is running for the West Virginia Auditor's position, and Hilary Turner, who is running against Republican incumbent Carol Miller for the U.S. House District 3 seat.

Both Claytor and Turner voiced support for the West Virginia Can't Wait campaign finance reform bill.

In the past two years, WV Can't Wait has recruited 101 candidates to run for office, with each committing to reject corporate donations, to never hide from a debate and to never cross a picket line.

Top Pa. GOP lawmaker taps politically connected lobbyist to be chief of staff

Pennsylvania Senate Majority Leader Jake Corman has tapped a top lobbyist with a politically connected Harrisburg firm to serve as his new chief of staff, the latest high-profile example of the cozy relationship between elected officials in the Capitol and special interests trying to influence them.

Corman, a Centre County Republican who is widely considered next in line to ascend to the chamber's top leadership post, told senators last week in an email that he had hired Krystjan Callahan, a partner at Maverick Strategies, a well-known lobbying firm run by Ray Zaborney, who also runs Corman's campaigns.

Callahan, 40, was once the top staffer to a Republican leader in the state House of Representatives. For the past five years, however, Callahan has worked for Zaborney, who together with his wife runs a trio of companies known as The Mavericks.

The companies help elect lawmakers and then lobby them once they are in office, a practice that good-government advocates say blurs the line between politics and policy.

Among Zaborney's marquee clients is Corman, whose campaigns he has run since 2015. Separately, Jen Zaborney, Zaborney's wife, runs the fundraising arm of The Mavericks and has helped Corman raise millions of dollars over the years.

And last month, The Caucus and Spotlight PA [revealed](#) Corman helped raise money at an exclusive event in California for a dark money group launched by Zaborney whose donors — and agenda — are largely a secret. The event coincided with a fundraiser, organized by one of the Maverick firms, that Corman was having at the same resort.

Corman and the group said they did not coordinate the events, which would be illegal.

Corman's decision to hire Callahan heightens Zaborney's already vast influence with the Centre County Republican, who is a favorite to take over the top leadership position in the Senate when Senate President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati (R., Jefferson) retires later this year.

"It's ripe for undue influence," said Brian Cullin, chair of Common Cause Pennsylvania. "It is certainly an area that needs to be explored to reform the process. It is problematic to see that level of coziness."

Jennifer Kocher, Corman's spokesperson, said Corman hired Callahan because of his qualifications, which she called "second to none." She said Corman should not be precluded from hiring the best-qualified person simply because of an association with Zaborney.

In an email to Republican senators announcing Callahan's hiring obtained by The Caucus and Spotlight PA, Corman wrote: "I believe Krystjan's years of experience in state government will be an asset to me and my staff as we continue to work toward our Caucus goals going into the fall and beyond."

Callahan, who begins his new job Monday, declined to be interviewed. His salary was not immediately available. Zaborney did not respond to questions.

There has long been a revolving door between the legislature and the lobbying world. But it more often than not has worked the opposite way, with legislative or state government staffers taking their experience and inside knowledge to jobs in private industry or lobbying firms, where they can earn significantly more money.

In Harrisburg, that has given rise to a handful of powerful lobbying firms that trade on having close relationships with the GOP lawmakers who set the legislative agenda.

Aside from Zaborney, dominating that market is Long, Nyquist & Associates. The firm is named for Mike Long, the Senate's onetime top Republican staffer and strategist, and Todd Nyquist, who served as chief of staff to Scarnati and describes himself on the firm's website as Scarnati's "alter ego."

Like Zaborney's companies, Long, Nyquist operates both a campaign and a lobbying arm, helping to elect candidates or reelect sitting officials and then lobbying them once they are in office.

Few other firms in Harrisburg offer both political and lobbying services. The DT Firm, run by Dave Thomas, formerly a top Republican lawyer in the Senate, recently added some political work to its company portfolio, which appears to still largely focus on lobbying.

Zaborney and Mike Long have long argued their work is legal and protected by the First Amendment. But critics believe their business model perpetuates a culture of undue access and favoritism. Several lawmakers have, over the years, attempted to ban the dual practice but have not succeeded.

An analysis of campaign finance records shows that firms run by the Zaborneys and Long and Nyquist have together been paid at least \$26.3 million since 2011 by legislative candidates, the state Republican party, GOP legislative campaign committees, congressional candidates, and various political action committees.

By contrast, the DT Firm has been paid just under \$300,000 for campaign work, including for Republican leaders in both the House and Senate.

Campaign committees for all three firms' lobbying arms, meanwhile, have given more than \$900,000 to GOP legislative leaders and others during that same time frame, the records show.

Because of Pennsylvania's weak lobbying disclosure laws, it is impossible to know which lawmakers the firms have lobbied, or on what issues. Unlike other states, Pennsylvania only requires that private interests, and their lobbyists, report the total amount of money they spent on lobbying activities, without having to provide any detail.

To be sure, Zaborney, Long, Nyquist, and Thomas' firms represent a range of clients, from big energy to casinos to unions to the Catholic Church.

Callahan, the onetime top aide to former Republican House Speaker Mike Turzai, was credited in late 2017 with helping persuade his former boss to support a vast expansion of gambling in the state, including legalizing and regulating slots-like machines called video gaming terminals, or VGTs.

Zaborney's firm, and by extension Callahan, represented the pro-VGT interests. Long, Nyquist represented a key maker and distributor of so-called "games of skill," which compete with VGT companies and have led efforts to tamp down VGT expansion.

In the end, the legislature only approved VGTs in truck stops. But VGT companies and their advocates have kept up their campaign since then, pushing to allow the terminals in bars,

taverns, social clubs, and other venues with a liquor license. Such a move would vastly expand their reach and result in millions in profit.

This past summer, Republicans who control the Senate [mounted a feverish, behind-the-scenes push](#) for more VGT terminals. Corman became the effort's public face.

The campaign ultimately failed but could likely be revived this fall, as the legislature grapples with ways to raise new revenue to offset the economic harm brought on by the pandemic.

Lobbying ordinance changes teed up for Leon County Commission vote

Leon County commissioners will vote on whether to strengthen their lobbying ordinance and put it before a public hearing, effectively clearing up any ambiguity of who is required to register and streamlining enforcement.

Commissioners continue to meet virtually at 3 p.m. Tuesday. The meeting can be watched on Comcast channel 16 or on the county's website, its [Facebook](#) or [Youtube](#) pages.

Commissioners in March unanimously approved reviewing and making amendments to the county ordinance following reporting by the Tallahassee Democrat that shed light on the intersection of lobbying, private business, political campaigns and public policy.

Commissioner Rick Minor took the lead, proposing revisions to the ordinance.

The enforcement of lobbying violations was described by former county attorney Herb Thiele as "cumbersome," but the proposal adds a thorough mechanism to the local ordinance. It details how the County Attorney's office will be designated to take complaints and investigate lobbying violations.

The proposal also adds a fine and suspension schedule for violations, as well as a 30-day appeals period.

Lobbying violations would technically go against the county code with penalties laid out in the general penalties section. It requires a citation to be issued and served by the Leon County Sheriff's Office, with the case assigned to county court and prosecuted by the State Attorney's Office in Tallahassee.

Additionally, the ordinance clarifies the definition of “lobbyist” and place those definitions closer to a regulation section. That is aimed to make it easier to determine whether someone qualifies as a lobbyist.

Specifically, the new proposal does not include an exemption that anyone who would qualify as a lobbyist is able to speak at public meetings without first registering, but does provide one for anyone simply seeking information.

Also to be included in the new ordinance language are sections:

- Removing a notarization requirement to register.
- Including a Q&A section on the county website to help people determine whether they need to register.
- Creating an online registration portal.