



M U L T I S T A T E

JCOPE Publishes Changes to Lobbying Regulations

The Joint Commission on Public Ethics (“JCOPE”) released proposed rulemaking to clarify its lobbying regulations, as published in the New York State Register on July 15, 2020. This comes a few months after releasing the proposed changes to gather feedback from the public. Now that the proposed changes have been officially published, the public is again allowed to provide comment for 60 days.

The initial lobbying regulations went into effect in January 2019. After hearing some criticism, JCOPE is now clarifying some of the requirements through amendments concerning (1) “source of funding” requirements; (2) the definitions pertaining to “Direct” and “Grassroots” lobbying, and (3) who should be registered as a lobbyist if participating in a “Lobby Day” on behalf of an organization.

Source of funding requirements pertain to clients who retain outside lobbyists and are required to file Client Semi-Annual reports in January and July. As part of this filing, these clients are required to disclose the source of the funds used to pay their outside lobbyists. The proposed changes clarify the definition of these “contributions,” which are intended to fund the client’s lobbying activities in whole or in part. JCOPE states that a “contribution” shall not mean the following:

- A payment in exchange for goods or services rendered or delivered directly to the individual or entity making the payment, and
- A payment that is earmarked and conditioned by a payor that it may be used only for a specific purpose other than lobbying activity in New York state and is thus maintained in a separate bank account and otherwise unavailable for general operating expenses. It is not sufficient for a payor to merely restrict the use of the funds for lobbying activity in New York state; to qualify for this exception, the payment must be earmarked for its specific purpose.

JCOPE has also proposed changes in an attempt to clarify the growing use of social media as part of Grassroots Lobbying campaigns. When contact occurs through an organization’s social media account, such activity is reportable “Lobbying Activity” by the organization but it does not need to list an individual lobbyist. Moreover, when an individual initiates contact with a public official through their personal social media account, this activity is not considered reportable

lobbying activity unless such individual is specifically retained by a client for such social media activity.

Organizations expressed concern related to the registration requirement of its employees by their mere attendance at a "Lobby Day," noting the administrative burden this could place on organizations hosting these events. According to the proposed language, JCOPE would now only require the registration of individuals who speak to public officials at a lobby day on behalf of their organization, and further clarifies that mere attendance by an employee or a volunteer does not require that individual to register as a lobbyist.

For a more detailed look at JCOPE's amendments, please visit [pgs. 19-21](#) of the NYS Register published on July 15, 2020.

[Larry Householder Facing 162 Campaign Finance Violations Related To Nuclear Bailout](#)

The Ohio Secretary of State is accusing fellow Republican and former Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder of 162 violations of campaign finance laws stemming from the nuclear bailout law he worked to pass. The campaign finance violations are related to the felony criminal charges Householder faces in federal court.

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose says he's connected the dots, building on the work done by the FBI in its criminal complaint against Householder and four others, including former Ohio Republican Party chair Matt Boreges. Those reported violations have been turned over to the Ohio Elections Commission.

The allegations in this filing relate to not only HB6, the nuclear bailout law that the five pushed for, but also to the work to stop a voter referendum on the law. LaRose says Householder and his group established shell companies to conceal contributions, converted funds for personal use, and used threats and intimidation to keep people from signing petitions.

The filing also names several entities that were charged in the federal case, including dark money group Generation Now and "Company A," widely believed to be FirstEnergy.

Meanwhile, the group that ran the failed bailout repeal campaign has been fined by the Ohio Elections Commission. The now-defunct Ohioans Against Corporate Bailouts faces a fine of more than \$5,200 each day since missing the January 31 campaign finance deadline to file a report that reveals its donors. The fine could be reconsidered if the group files a report.

Householder was stripped of his speaker post in July, although he is running unopposed in the November election to retain his seat in the Ohio House of Representatives.

A federal judge has scheduled a new hearing for Householder, who's charged with conspiracy to commit racketeering. Court filings show Householder struggled to find an attorney to represent him after his current lawyer said a conflict of interest prohibits his further involvement. Judge Timothy Black on Wednesday set Householder's hearing for September 3.

Borges, lobbyists Neil Clark and Juan Cespedes, and Householder adviser Jeff Longstreth all pleaded not guilty at a hearing earlier this month.

[Hawaiian Lobbyist Nickie Lum Davies Pleads Guilty Over Back-Channel Campaign for Najib and Jho Low](#)

The US Department of Justice issued comprehensive charges against [Nickie Lum Davies](#) which deeply implicated a number of senior republican officials, in [particular the former Chairman of the Republican National Committee](#) Elliot Broidy and Rick Gates.

She has now pleaded guilty on all counts, as has DOJ lawyer George Higgenbotham who acted to assist the team of collaborators who were secretly paid to assist Jho Low and Najib Razak in their attempts to influence the Trump administration to drop the case on 1MDB.

It mounts pressure on [Elliot Broidy and his lawyer wife Robin Broidy](#) who are yet to be faced with charges and also on singer Pras Michel who has decided to fight the case brought against him for money laundering on behalf of Jho Low and [assisting in his secret lobbying](#) without declaring his activities under the law.

An American businesswoman with international ties pleaded guilty today for her role in facilitating an unregistered lobbying campaign of the Administration of the President of the United States and the U.S. Department of Justice on behalf of foreign principals in exchange for millions of dollars.

Acting Assistant Attorney General Brian C. Rabbitt of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, Assistant Attorney General John C. Demers of the Justice Department's National Security Division, U.S. Attorney Kenji M. Price of the District of Hawaii, Special Agent in Charge Eli S. Miranda of the FBI's Honolulu Field Office, and Special Agent in Charge Keith A. Bonanno of the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General (OIG) made the announcement.

Nickie Mali Lum Davis, 45, of Honolulu, Hawaii, pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Leslie E. Kobayashi to one count of aiding and abetting violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

“In exchange for millions of dollars, Nickie Davis and others covertly sought to do the bidding of a foreign government and a foreign principal by attempting to influence senior U.S. government officials regarding a pending Department of Justice investigation and the extradition of a foreign national,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Brian C. Rabbitt of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “Though Ms. Davis’s efforts were unsuccessful, this case demonstrates how foreign governments seek to advance their agendas in the United States by hiding behind politically influential proxies. Such conduct poses a serious threat to our national security and undermines the integrity of our democracy. The failure to disclose these relationships harms both the American people and government officials by preventing them from accounting for and evaluating the true source of and motivation for foreign lobbying efforts.”

“As this prosecution makes clear, those who line their pockets by facilitating a foreign national’s campaign to lobby our nation’s leaders will not hide under a cloak of anonymity,” said U.S. Attorney Kenji M. Price of the District of Hawaii. “Through our investigations and prosecutions, we will uncover your criminal conduct and hold you accountable.”

“Lum Davis, along with her coconspirators, attempted to influence the Department of Justice’s independence on behalf of a foreign country in exchange for millions of dollars. The OIG worked diligently with the FBI on this matter in order to protect the department’s integrity,” Keith A. Bonanno, Special Agent in Charge of the DOJ OIG Cyber Investigations Office.

According to admissions made in connection with her plea, Lum Davis admitted that, between March 2017 and January 2018, she and others — including a prominent official of a national political party with ties to the administration — agreed to lobby the President of the United States, the Attorney General, and other high level officials in the administration and the Justice Department to drop civil forfeiture proceedings and a criminal investigation into the embezzlement of billions of dollars from 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), a strategic investment and development company wholly owned by the Government of Malaysia.

For their efforts, Lum Davis and others were paid millions of dollars by Foreign National A, an alleged architect of the 1MDB scheme. Lum Davis and others also agreed to lobby the Administration and Justice Department on behalf of Foreign National A and People’s Republic of China (PRC) Minister A, to arrange for the removal and return of PRC National A — a dissident of the PRC living in the United States. Lum Davis and others concealed from the officials whom they lobbied that they were working on behalf of Foreign National A and Foreign Minister A and were being paid millions of dollars by Foreign National A with the expectation of tens of millions more in success fees. The lobbying campaigns were ultimately unsuccessful.

Among other actions, Lum Davis and her confederates tried to arrange meetings for PRC Minister A with the Attorney General, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other high-level officials during the PRC Minister's visit to the United States in May 2017; provided talking points to the Secretary of State referencing the 1MDB investigation in advance of a meeting between the Secretary of State and the Malaysian Prime Minister in August 2017; and pushed the White House Chief of Staff for a meeting and golf game between the President and the Malaysian Prime Minister to allow the Malaysian Prime Minister to raise resolution of the 1MDB investigation. Lum Davis was paid at least \$3 million for her role in the scheme, which she has agreed to forfeit as part of her plea agreement. The national political party official was paid at least \$9 million.

George Higginbotham previously pleaded guilty for his role in the scheme on Nov. 30, 2018, in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Sentencing for Lum Davis will be set on a date to be determined.

The Honolulu and Los Angeles Field Divisions of the FBI and Justice Department-OIG investigated the case. Principal Deputy Chief John D. Keller, Deputy Director of Election Crimes Sean F. Mulryne, and Trial Attorneys Nicole R. Lockhart and James C. Mann of the Criminal Division's Public Integrity Section (PIN), and Assistant U.S. Attorney Ken Sorenson of the District of Hawaii are prosecuting the case. Former PIN Trial Attorney Ryan Ellersick also provided significant assistance in the investigation.

[Indicted Householder accomplice lobbied for Ohio University to influence state funding](#)

One of Rep. Larry Householder's (R-Glenford) recently indicted accomplices was employed in the past by Ohio University to lobby lawmakers in the Statehouse to influence university funding provided through the state budget on at least one occasion, [lobbying records show](#).

Neil S. Clark, an OU alumnus (bachelor's and master's degrees) and owner of the Columbus lobbying firm Grant Street Consultants, was personally employed by the university for at least more than a year between January 2009 and August 2010 to lobby for the state budget on its behalf, according to lobbying records.

OU, however, retained [State Street Consultants](#), the lobbying firm Clark founded in 1999 with Democrat Paul Tipps, between April 2003 and January 2009 to advocate for the university at the Statehouse in the absence of an in-house government relations department, Spokesperson Carly Leatherwood said.

State Street Consultants was paid by the university a rate of \$4,000 per month, totaling \$292,000 over a six-year period for its services, Leatherwood said.

It's unclear if Clark himself lobbied for the university before 2009 because state lobbying records from before that year are not archived online.

Clark, who personally lobbied for OU on the budget [alongside a handful of others](#) in 2009, is a longtime Columbus lobbyist who was arrested and indicted in July in connection to his central involvement in Householder's alleged scheme to take \$60 million in First Energy company bribes to further the former speaker's political ambitions and influence public policy.

It's not clear, however, what specific provisions Clark was tasked with influencing in the 2009-2010 state budget. Leatherwood said in an email she was unable to provide details about his services "due to the length of time that has passed" since Clark was with the university.

OU received a healthy amount of funding through the state's budget that year, including a grant for \$350,000 in each fiscal year to support the [OU Institute for Local Government Administration and Rural Development](#), which is known today as [The Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs](#).

Also included in the state budget that year was an earmark providing a \$200,000 grant in each fiscal year for the Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine's [mobile health care unit](#), which deploys large trucks to travel across the state and provide medical services.

The university received an additional \$50,000 grant in each fiscal year for the [Ohio University leadership Project](#), a professional development program for school administrators.

Lobbyists are often tasked with ensuring that provisions aren't included in legislation, though it's unclear if Clark or his colleagues had their hands in also preventing items from being added in that year's budget in the interest of OU.

Clark is characterized in a federal affidavit filed against him, Householder and their three other accomplices — referred to collectively as "The Enterprise" — as a member who allegedly oversaw Householder's dark money nonprofit that was used to funnel what he called "unlimited" funds provided by First Energy and other organizations.

In his own words, Clark was one of Householder's "closest advisors" and his "hit man" who was willing to do the "dirty shit," according to the affidavit. He once said he "wanted to be around

politicians like Householder who ‘will go to the wall, but those guys that go to the wall can only do it once a year because if they do it all the time everybody knows they’re pay to play,’” the affidavit said.

He also allegedly helped orchestrate their plan to fund the campaigns of candidates in 2018 that they believed would work to elect Householder as speaker and eventually vote for House Bill 6, legislation that ultimately bailed out Ohio nuclear plants.

In addition, Clark reportedly sent text messages to a House member who indicated they wouldn’t vote for House Bill 6, threatening that Householder would withhold future committee chairmanships and prevent their legislation from progressing if they did not bow to the speaker’s wishes, according to the affidavit. He also reportedly helped The Enterprise stop ballot initiative efforts that aimed to defeat House Bill 6.

Clark previously lobbied for other higher education institutions and public school systems. And he served as budget director for the Ohio Senate Republican Caucus.

In recent years, Clark served as a spokesperson and top lobbyist for Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), an online charter school company under investigation by the FBI for overstating its enrollment, according to [The Dayton Daily News](#).

[In Washington, the revolving door between government service and lobbying is well-greased](#)

On the evening of Monday, March 23, Washington Gov. Jay Inslee [delivered a televised address](#) from his office at the capitol to announce his “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order. That order effectively shut down as many as 230,000 Washington businesses deemed nonessential.

Two days prior, a lobbyist with deep, personal ties to Inslee had contacted one of the governor’s senior policy advisors on behalf of the commercial fishing industry.

“I’m working with the At-Sea processors which is the biggest fishery in the country and the second biggest in the world,” wrote Brian Bonlender in a March 21 email to Charles Knutson, who advises Inslee on economic development, innovation and global affairs.

Bonlender, whose connection to Inslee dates to the early 1990s, wanted to know if the governor was going to designate critical infrastructure -- exempt from any shutdown order -- and, if so, whether commercial fishing would be included.

On the day of Inslee's announcement, Bonlender followed up with another email -- this one to Inslee's general counsel, Kathryn Leathers. Once again, he asked if commercial fishing would be deemed critical infrastructure under a shelter-at-home order. Bonlender also inquired about housing construction on behalf of another client, a large construction firm.

He wrote: "Are you able to tell me if: 1) Commercial fishing would be determined to be critical infrastructure or critical activity under a home/shelter order? Federal guidance includes commercial fishing. 2) Would housing construction be designated as critical infrastructure/activity? I believe that California has included such activity."

Bonlender was no stranger to Inslee's office. Just 14 months earlier, he'd stepped down as a member of Inslee's executive cabinet. From 2013 until January of 2019 Bonlender headed the Washington Department of Commerce, an agency with a broad portfolio that ranges from homelessness assistance to international trade. Prior to that, he'd served as Inslee's transition director, was a senior advisor to Inslee's 2012 gubernatorial campaign and had risen to the position of chief of staff when Inslee served in Congress. In fact, Bonlender had spent the better part of a quarter of a century, since graduating from Washington State University, working for Inslee in one capacity or another.

Soon after leaving his job at the Department of Commerce, Bonlender started his own consulting and lobbying firm – Lodestar Strategic. Bonlender said lobbying constitutes about a quarter of his work.

"I left [state service] because I wanted to see my children grow up," Bonlender wrote in an email. "After over 20 years of public service and the last six commuting daily from North Seattle to Olympia in a 24/7 job, it was just time."

Bonlender's move from high-ranking government official to registered lobbyist was not unusual. Of Washington's [roughly 800 lobbyists](#), nearly one-in-five previously worked in state government or served in elected office. That's according to a first-of-its-kind analysis by the public radio Northwest News Network and The Seattle Times.

Within that group are at least 60 former state lawmakers, high-level officials and staffers, including: two former Democratic state senators, two former directors of the state Department of Ecology, one former Department of Revenue director and three former gubernatorial chiefs of staff.

Records show many of them registered as lobbyists within a few months of leaving public service and some within days. Unlike most states, Washington doesn't restrict this so-called revolving door between public service and lobbying. But it's not for lack of trying.

“I am passionate about eliminating what I call the ‘Friday to Monday problem,’” said Democratic state Sen. Reuven Carlyle, referring to the idea that someone can leave state service on a Friday and show back up on Monday as a lobbyist.

Since 2015, Carlyle has [sponsored legislation](#) to require a cooling off period before former high level staff and elected officials can become lobbyists. He said the issue first hit his radar in 2013 when he was in the Washington House and became chair of the Finance Committee. In that role, Carlyle said, former state officials lobbied him on behalf of business interests seeking preferential tax rates and exemptions.

“So that revolving door became very real to me and I just thought it was important to take a stand on the issue,” Carlyle said.

The majority of states, including Oregon, and the federal government impose some type of waiting period between public service and lobbying, according to analyses by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) and the watchdog group [Public Citizen](#). But not Washington state.

Government reform advocates argue that without restrictions, the potential exists for public officials to be influenced with the promise of a lucrative job. Even if there’s no quid pro quo, they say, the situation can create the perception that a state official is cashing in on their insider status.

“We don’t believe it’s acceptable to use this information to be exploited for any special interest,” said Cindy Black of the nonprofit [Fix Democracy First](#) during legislative testimony in 2019.

“Setting parameters and having some time off before you enter the private sector as a lobbyist is a commonsense reform to slow down a process that has become routine.”

As currently proposed, the cooling off period in Washington – one year in the [Senate bill](#), two years in the [House version](#) -- would only apply to former elected officials and high level staff.

But, year after year, efforts to pass this legislation have been unsuccessful.

“The slow winter fog of political death seems to find its way toward this bill every single year,” Carlyle said.

Over the years, there's been no public opposition to the revolving door legislation. But House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, the number two Democrat in the state House, said there also hasn't been a groundswell of support for the idea.

"I don't know that around this issue we've heard from a lot of people on it," Sullivan said.

Carlyle said the idea of slowing the revolving door makes people uncomfortable and that behind the scenes there's wariness.

"A lot of folks feel like people who serve in public life, in public office or public service shouldn't be penalized for future employment opportunities," he said.

One skeptic of a cooling off period is Matt Steuerwalt who, in 2017, left his position as Inslee's director of policy and three months later joined a lobbying firm operated by a former gubernatorial chief of staff. Previously, Steuerwalt had also worked for Gov. Christine Gregoire.

"I am proud of my 14 years in public service and honored by the trust that two Governors put in my strategic judgment," Steuerwalt wrote in an email earlier this year. "I am similarly honored by the trust that our clients put in our firm to advocate for their interests and proud to work for them."

Steuerwalt, who lives in Seattle and has two young sons, said he left Inslee's office because of family considerations.

The firm he joined, [Insight Strategic Partners](#), was founded in 2016 by Marty Loesch, who served as chief of staff to Gregoire from 2011 to 2013. Despite its status as a relative newcomer, Insight Strategic Partners already boasts a long list of high profile clients including the NFL, Amazon, Zillow, Lyft and Puget Sound Energy. In August, the [firm reported](#) it had collected \$112,950 in fees from 20 clients the previous month.

In his email, Steuerwalt pushed back on the idea that the revolving door is problematic. He wrote that the news organizations' line of questioning suggested that "there is something inherently unreasonable" about people leaving state service to lobby and vice versa.

"Washington has existing ethics and transparency laws that appear to be working well, and it doesn't seem to me that a long-standing prohibition like this at the federal level has given citizens any more faith in the integrity of their federal government," Steuerwalt wrote.

Under current Washington ethics laws, former state employees are prohibited from working on a contract or regulatory matter for a private employer, if they previously worked in a personal and substantial way on that same issue for the state. But that lifetime ban, under the employment after public service law, is generally not a barrier for most state officials who become lobbyists.

Under the proposed revolving door legislation, the transition from public servant to lobbyist would still be allowed, but only after a waiting period.

Since 2017, Democratic state Rep. Mike Pellicciotti has sponsored the revolving door bill in the Washington House. Last year, Pellicciotti told a legislative committee that “jaws hit the ground” when he tells constituents that he could resign his seat and become a paid lobbyist with no waiting period.

“And when jaws are hitting the ground, it’s a pretty good indication that our laws are not comporting with public expectation,” Pellicciotti said in his 2019 testimony.

Washington’s revolving door received renewed scrutiny last year when then-state Sen. Guy Palumbo, a Democrat, resigned his seat to become a state lobbyist for Amazon.

Prior to stepping down, Palumbo had been the prime sponsor of a bill to require state agencies to adopt cloud computing solutions for any new information technology investments.

In urging his colleagues to approve the bill, which passed the state Senate but died in the House, Palumbo touted Washington’s homegrown cloud computing companies.

“Namely Microsoft and Amazon who are the worldwide leaders in this space,” Palumbo said at the time.

Palumbo declined to comment for this story. In an email, an Amazon spokesperson noted that Palumbo was one of the company’s first 800 employees. “So bringing him back was a natural fit,” said the spokesperson.

But at the time, Palumbo’s abrupt role change from lawmaker to lobbyist provided fresh ammunition for advocates of a cooling off period.

“I think that’s the kind of thing that causes people to think, ‘Wait a second, wouldn’t it make sense to have that cooling off period of a year before you turn to that type of service,’” said

Democratic Attorney General Bob Ferguson, who has championed the revolving door legislation since 2015.

Pellicciotti, who's running for state treasurer this year, also took note of Palumbo's resignation.

"It never looks good when elected officials cash in on their public service for their personal gain by becoming a paid lobbyist," Pellicciotti said.

The optics of people leaving state service to immediately become lobbyists also troubles Republican state Rep. Morgan Irwin, a co-sponsor of Pellicciotti's bill. Irwin, a police officer who's not running for re-election, said it's to be expected that lawmakers will take another job once they leave office.

"But we also need to be clear to our voters and constituents that we're not coming [to Olympia] for the wrong reasons and that once we leave here we're not bringing with us some sort of special privilege," Irwin said.

This year, Carlyle, the Senate sponsor, said he agreed to a Republican compromise that would have scaled back the cooling off requirement so that it applied only to former statewide elected officials and state lawmakers, not staffers. But once again, the House and Senate bills didn't come up for a vote before the Legislature adjourned in mid-March.

It was later that month that Bonlender, the former Commerce director, contacted Inslee's staff on behalf of his commercial fishing client.

"Like many industries, the commercial fishing industry was trying to understand how they [might] be impacted by any state's coronavirus related orders," Bonlender explained recently in an email to the public radio Northwest News Network and The Seattle Times.

Bonlender said it was his understanding the state of Alaska had already deemed commercial fishing essential as part of the broader food industry. There was concern, he said, that if Washington didn't follow suit it would impact the Puget Sound-based fleet, which fishes in federal waters and makes shore calls in Alaska.

"Rendering them all inoperable could have [had] local, national, and global impacts for a part of the economy that is about as essential as essential gets – food production," Bonlender wrote in his email.

Records obtained by The Seattle Times show Bonlender first contacted Inslee's office on the Saturday before Inslee issued his stay home order. Senior Policy Advisor Charles Knutson responded that same day to confirm receipt of the email and to let Bonlender know he had shared the inquiry with Kathryn Leathers, the office's general counsel.

Two days later, Bonlender followed up with Leathers to ask about both commercial fishing and residential construction. She soon responded. But it wasn't the news Bonlender was looking for.

"I think the list is a work in progress, but I don't believe commercial fishing is currently being considered an essential business," Leathers wrote back. "As for housing construction, I think the same is likely probably true."

Bonlender quickly responded to ask if agriculture and food production were considered essential. He noted that the Puget Sound Pollock fleet, along with other fishing fleets, "constitutes a lot of protein harvest."

Ten minutes later, the email chain showed, Leathers wrote back with a promising update: agriculture and food production were considered essential as were "seafood slaughter facilities."

"[S]o I'm going to guess that the suppliers are included," she wrote. "Everyone wants an answer today, before the order is even finalized, and I understand that."

But when Inslee issued his formal stay home proclamation later that same day, commercial fishing wasn't specifically called out in his [14-page list](#) of "Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers."

After that, Bonlender said, he "pointed out to relevant state officials that the initial order was unclear as to whether the seafood industry was deemed essential." Bonlender added that he wasn't the only one from the fishing industry contacting the governor's office at the time.

A week later, on March 31, Inslee's office issued a revised order. [In that update](#), workers in several industries, including geoduck fisheries and commercial fishing, were specifically called out as essential.

"The Governor and his team were willing to listen and they ultimately decided to evolve their thinking," Bonlender said.

An Inslee spokesperson told the news outlets that commercial fishing was always considered essential and only got special mention in the governor's revised order because there was confusion about its status.

"Staff does not recall a point where commercial fishing and shellfish weren't a part of the essential business of food production," wrote Tara Lee, the governor's communications director.

Bonlender said he was asked to contact the governor's office in March because the COVID pandemic had required many in state government to assume new roles and responsibilities and it wasn't always clear who was responsible for what.

"I was tasked with figuring that out and making the case for what may seem obvious -- that the seafood industry is part of the larger food industry," Bonlender said.

He also noted that, in addition to making inquiries on behalf of his clients, he worked, "on a voluntary basis," to try to help the state procure personal protective equipment and ventilators in the early weeks of the pandemic. At one point, Bonlender said, a state official contacted him to see if he could help find local manufacturers who could make necessary components for ventilators.

"I wanted to do what I could to help, so I responded to those pleas," Bonlender said.