



M U L T I S T A T E

[State board proposals would change how lobbying activities are reported in Minnesota](#)

The Minnesota board that oversees the lobbying of state and local governments is considering changes that would make reporting by lobbyists more useful and more transparent.

Both the current rules and the proposed rules are complex, but here's one summary: lobbyists would no longer have to report overhead costs (including "telephone and telegraph" expenditures), but they would have to report the actual bill numbers and ordinances they pushed for, as well as which clients they worked for and what they did to influence the result.

In addition, for the first time, lobbyists — and groups that hire them — would have to say how much they spend on grassroots lobbying, such as TV and radio ads that urge residents to call their legislator and tell them to vote yes or no on particular bills. Also for the first time: lobbying of the Public Utilities Commission would have to be broken out from lobbying of other state administrative agency's rule-making. That's in response to the large lobbying efforts [over permits for the Line 3 oil pipeline project](#).

The Campaign Finance Board [meets Friday to consider the changes](#). But [the board only recommends](#); legislation is required to make any changes to the rules that determine how much information residents of the state get about who spends how much to influence legislators, administrative agencies and local councils and boards. (Update: The board Friday morning approved the recommendations on a 5-0 vote.)

Gaps in reporting

In a memo [to the Campaign Finance Board last year](#), board Executive Director Jeff Sigurdson said the current rules are "both limited to financial information and focused on reporting details that do not help the public understand the relationship between lobbyists and the making of public policy."

Sigurdson wrote that lobbyist reports have little connection between what lobbyists do, what their employers spend and the public decisions that are made. He said the current reports “may even promote the false narrative that those lobbying disbursements are just a big pot of money thrown at elected officials, which fuels public cynicism of government decision making.”

Sigurdson has been with the state Campaign Finance Board since 2000 and has been executive director since 2016. He said in an interview this week that while campaign finance reporting is more clear, “I don’t understand what is being gained by lobbying disbursement reports. The big questions, or even the smaller questions, are simply not being addressed.”

One gap, he said, at the local government level. A lobbyist is required to disclose that they did something at that level — but not at which city or county, or what issue, or even when. “That makes it pointless for us to say that we have lobbying reporting for metropolitan governments,” he said.

Jeremy Estenson, a registered lobbyist and the immediate past president of the Minnesota Government Relations Council, the lobbying industry’s professional association in the state, said the group has been working with board staff on the changes.

“Some of the changes I would consider as modernizing — having to report your cellphone bill and things like that — we have no objections,” Estenson said. But there are also some more contentious issues, such as the definition of who is a lobbyist and therefore subject to the reporting law.

One is a change in how so-called citizen lobbyists are treated. Now, someone who isn’t paid by another entity and spends more than \$250 of their own money must register. The board wants to increase that threshold to \$3,000.

“There are a lot of people now whose profession or full-time hobby has turned into advocacy such that they want to modify legislation,” Estenson said. “From our perspective, we want to put everyone who is doing what we’re doing on an equal foot. It may make reporting easier for some people,” he said of the citizen lobbyist change. “However, I’m not sure it’s consistent with the goal here of putting some daylight on how an idea becomes a law and who is responsible.”

The biggest objections surround the campaign finance board’s proposals to require bill-by-bill, client-by-client reporting of an individual lobbyist’s day, especially given the use of omnibus bills at the Legislature. Those are the end-of-session bills where dozens or even hundreds of bills are rolled a single large bill.

“Here’s an example,” Estenson said. “I work for a client. I get bill X introduced. Bill X goes through the committee process, is modified in such a way that my client is now neutral on the bill and then it gets merged into the omnibus bill and at this point I don’t care anymore.

“The more granular you get, the more difficult it is to accurately represent any given conversation. Interpreting the world of the capitol in a binary, ones and zeros way, is the most-certain way to misrepresent what actually goes on. It’s not zero and one, it’s every single number.”

“We are all for coming up with something that works,” he said.

But the council members don’t want to face punishments when they act in good faith. “This is a reputation business,” Estenson said. “Nobody wants to be accused of not following the rules, particularly when they intended to follow the rules.”

What’s being proposed

[The current system requires two types of reports](#) that often do not mesh very well. Twice a year, lobbyists report each client they represented and breaks down what they spent by category. This is where the cell phone, office rent and travel are reported, divvied up by multiple clients.

“I am unsure of the meaningful disclosure gained from knowing the cost of a lobbyist’s cell phone plan, much less from a calculation that splits the cost of the plan among multiple clients,” Sigurdson wrote the board last year.

A second batch of reports comes from lobbyists’ employers, such as companies, unions or trade associations. These reports say how much an organization paid lobbyists in general, but they aren’t broken down by individual lobbyists.

Sigurdson reported that the two reports often arrive at vastly different sums. In 2018, for example, the total reported by all the individual lobbyists for their work was \$9.57 million, while the total reported by all of the employers was \$78.8 million.

Three main changes

Currently, paid lobbyists have to register the issues they intend to work on. But the categories are either so general or so specific that they don’t provide much help for anyone trying to watch who is trying to influence decisions, Sigurdson said.

For example, the staff has to remind applicants that simply listing “general legislation” on the form is not sufficient in reporting subject matter. At the same time, Sigurdson’s database contains 2,326 different issue subjects and 1,449 different associations trying to affect policy.

Instead, he is proposing a two-step method. A lobbyist would pick one of the general categories provided by the board— education, civil law, taxes or energy, for example — and then provide a more-specific topic: charter schools, tort reform, commercial property taxes or wind power, for example.

When it comes to reporting requirements, paid lobbyists must now report activities to which they devoted 25 percent or more of their time. But the current rules do not require them to say which bills or rules or local ordinances they worked on for a client. The latter would change under the proposed rules.

The campaign finance board staff recognizes that the accounting of time spent for lobbyists who represent multiple clients can be difficult. And Sigurdson recognizes that the Minnesota Legislature’s use of massive omnibus bills is problematic. So the proposal would ask that lobbyists use a “reasonable good-faith estimate” and acknowledges that the process relies on “the integrity of lobbyists to provide accurate reports on lobbying activity on behalf of their clients.”

Another proposal would affect how media expenditures are tracked. The current law requires individual lobbyists to report the purchase of advertising or other media on behalf of a client meant to influence legislation. That would continue, but the proposal expands the reporting to include the cost, a description of the media used and the specific subject of the ads.

“It’s an attempt to influence the opinion of the public on the issue. It seemed appropriate to give a little bit more direct information on how much was being spent on a TV ad or a series of radio ads,” he said.

‘Facilitating access’ changes off the table

A fourth area of change proposed by Sigurdson last year has been taken off the board agenda for now. That was a new rule — “facilitating access to public or local officials” — that would have expanded the definition of “lobbying” to include someone who only makes introductions or sets up meetings between lawmakers and those who want to meet with them. Currently, that is not considered lobbying and the person doing it does not have to register as a lobbyist.

Sigurdson considered that a gap in reporting. “For example, a former legislator is paid to make introductions and arrange meetings between public officials and lobbyists,” he wrote last year. Under the current rules, if the former legislator doesn’t attend the meeting or doesn’t speak on the issue at the meeting, they aren’t legally a lobbyist.

Some states have rules that require two years between those two activities, called revolving door bans. Minnesota does not. So a legislator can lobby the day after leaving office, providing less reason for them to restrict their activities to “facilitating access” in order to slip under the definition.

Sigurdson said there was also confusion among some current lawmakers and staff members who thought the rule would require them to register as lobbyists if they set up meetings. It does not, but Sigurdson said he didn’t want the issue to distract the staff and board from working on the other lobbying changes.

“The reality is, especially in this session where all communication with members is probably either going to be on the phone or some sort of Zoom call, if I get 15 minutes I’m lucky,” Sigurdson said in an interview this week. “I’ve spent too much time talking about that proposal” rather than the more-substantive lobby reporting changes.

Lobbyists agree to pay financial penalties in ethics case

Two well-known Oklahoma lobbyists will not face criminal charges for their involvement in a PAC that made illegal donations totaling \$27,750.

Oklahoma County District Attorney David Prater made the decision not to prosecute in light of their agreements with the Oklahoma Ethics Commission to pay substantial penalties to the state.

James Milner agreed to pay \$65,000 to the state general revenue fund and never again to serve as an officer of a PAC.

James McSpadden agreed to pay \$50,000 and not serve as an officer of a PAC for 10 years.

Milner was listed as the chair of the little-known PAC and Milner was listed as its treasurer.

Funding for the PAC — Oklahomans For Healthy Living — came from companies tied to a Missouri holding company, an Ethics Commission investigation found.

Milner was a lobbyist for the main company, JES Holdings LLC.

The Ethics Commission approved the settlements Dec. 31. In an announcement last week, the Ethics Commission said the PAC acted as a "straw man" that accepted and then distributed illegal corporate contributions.

The PAC also failed to report any of the funding it received and only one of the donations it made.

In signing the settlements, both Milner and McSpadden acknowledged that the PAC "served as a straw donor to hide the true source of contributions to Oklahoma political committees and failed to file reports disclosing the corporate source of the contributions."

Milner told the Ethics Commission in 2019 that even though McSpadden was listed as the PAC's treasurer, McSpadden did not have possession of the PAC's checkbook and "had no knowledge of the contributions made to or from the PAC at any time."

The Ethics Commission in its announcement confirmed McSpadden "did not have actual access" to the PAC's financial records and accounts.

The Ethics Commission said the DA's decision not to file charges "has been made independently and separate" from the settlement agreements.

Playing into the DA's decision was that the lobbyists eventually cooperated in the ethics investigation and they self-reported to his office that they were being investigated, The Oklahoman was told.

Milner is relieved to have this episode behind him and accepts the outcome, his attorney, Jonathan Buxton, told the Tulsa World last week.

The agreement "is a painful but acceptable end to his cooperation with this investigation of the Ethics Commission," the attorney said.

McSpadden said he was asked to allow his name to be used as PAC treasurer "without fully understanding what was expected of me."

"Significant errors were made that I now understand," he said in a statement sent by his attorney. "I regret deeply that my lack of understanding responsibilities in the role led to this outcome. I have accepted responsibility for my unintentional errors related to this matter and have learned a hard, but valuable lesson."

McSpadden also made a joint statement with the Ethics Commission about the settlement.

"It is easy to approach campaigns, and the laws that apply to them, as little more than a game due to the competitive nature of politics," McSpadden and the Ethics Commission said. "Campaign finance laws are not rules of a game. They are vital to protecting the sanctity of our electoral system."

"The Commission's underfunding and lack of resources is well known. This increases the likelihood that violations of the Ethics Rules will occur. While significant penalties are a part of this settlement, those funds by law go to the General Revenue Fund of Oklahoma and not to fund the Ethics Commission."

[New Pa. GOP leader pushes transparency reforms despite party's past reluctance, obstruction](#)

In his first speech as top leader of the Pennsylvania Senate last week, Republican Sen. Jake Corman positioned himself as a reformer seeking to restore faith in government by greatly increasing transparency in the legislature and by elected lawmakers.

Transparency should be at the center of everything senators do, he said, whether filing office expenses, raising campaign cash, or dealing with lobbyists and dark money groups.

Corman said he would support lobbying reform to "clearly define relationships between legislators, lobbyists, and political consultants." He also stressed the need for what he called "real-time reporting of campaign contribution expenses," and suggested stricter disclosures for nonprofit groups that engage in political activity, which currently operate largely in the shadows.

"I looked at what we could do to restore faith in [our] institution," he said in an interview. "I believe moving forward, that is transparency."

But an analysis of his track record as a ranking member of the Senate Republican caucus over the past five years reveals more talk than action on government transparency. The majority

party has faced criticisms regarding how the legislature spends taxpayer dollars on its own operations, campaign finance disclosures, and questionable ties to dark money groups.

Reform bills, meanwhile, have languished, even though Republicans exclusively control the agenda for which legislation gets heard — and have for Corman’s entire two-decade tenure in the Senate.

“He [Corman] speaks of these major reforms and the need for them and on his own has demonstrated in part why they are a problem,” said Christopher Borick, a political science professor at Muhlenberg College in Allentown. “Some people might call that hypocrisy.”

Last year, for instance, top Senate officials used an obscure clause in the state constitution to [redact details about how they spend](#) tens of millions of dollars in taxpayer money every year.

When The Caucus and Spotlight PA requested the information, the Senate first redacted many descriptions of what, and who, the chamber spent money on. Later, Senate officials attempted to scrub those details entirely from expense records, raising alarm among open records advocates.

The Senate Republicans’ top lawyer, Crystal Clark, also directed senators not to answer reporters’ questions about the deletions, even as some questioned why they were necessary.

Senate leaders, including Corman and then-Senate President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati, did nothing to reverse the practice, even as their counterparts in the House decided to make more information publicly available.

A few senators on both sides of the aisle — including Lindsey Williams (D., Allegheny) and Kristin Phillips-Hill (R., York) — responded to the stories by posting more detailed accountings of their office expenses on their websites.

“Talk is cheap,” said Williams, noting Corman could have told senators to post their expenses online, or included reforms in new Senate rules adopted last week.

On campaign finance, House and Senate candidates continue to be allowed to file vague disclosures that make it difficult for the public to determine exactly how they are spending their money. The practice was exposed in a 2019 investigation by The Caucus and Spotlight PA that [found, over three years, \\$3.5 million](#) in spending by candidates that could not be fully traced.

The investigation found Corman's campaign had spent more than \$73,000 from 2016 through 2018 that was listed in public reports as credit card expenses. Receipts obtained by the news organizations showed those payments included about \$2,000 each year for liquor — described broadly as holiday gifts — and \$200 for a limo during a Pennsylvania Society weekend.

Corman's campaign said at the time that he complied with the law, but that he supported more transparency and "quicker disclosure of donations." Still, as then-majority leader, he did not prioritize any bills that proposed an overhaul of campaign finance laws.

In late October 2019, Senate Minority Leader Jay Costa (D., Allegheny) proposed a comprehensive campaign finance reform bill, parts of which were in direct response to The Caucus and Spotlight PA's investigation. The bill, just as it had happened in previous years, died without any consideration.

Until last week, Corman had also not expressed interest in additional public disclosure requirements for nonprofit groups that organize under federal tax law as 501(c)(4) organizations. Better known as dark money nonprofits, such groups can spend unlimited amounts of money in political races, but don't have to disclose their donors.

Now, Corman said he believes if such groups name a candidate in paid advertising, they should be subject to the same disclosure as traditional campaign and political action committees, which are required to detail both donors and expenses.

The reversal came after The Caucus and Spotlight PA revealed that Corman [helped raise money](#) last March for one such 501(c)(4) group founded by his campaign manager, Ray Zaborney, who doubles as a lobbyist. The little-known group, called Growth and Opportunity Fund Inc., does not reveal its donors and discloses very little about how it spends its cash.

The Growth and Opportunity Fund held a fundraiser at a posh California golf resort last March, where Corman was touted as a special guest. The event was held at the same location and within a day of a separate fundraiser by Corman's campaign. The campaign and the dark money group denied any coordination, which would be illegal.

But the proximity of the two events raised questions about whether elected officials should be raising money for groups whose donors are cloaked in secrecy. The fundraiser also emphasized Corman's ties to Zaborney, who together with his wife runs a trio of companies that fundraise for Republican candidates, run their campaigns, and then lobby lawmakers once in office.

Zaborney contends a “firewall” prevents any coordination between those separate functions.

In his speech before Senate colleagues, Corman said he would work with House Speaker Bryan Cutler (R., Lancaster) on a lobbyist reform bill.

The pair “are still very much in the planning stages of what the [lobbyist reform] legislation may look ultimately to accomplish,” a spokesperson for Cutler, Mike Straub, said. But Corman told The Caucus and Spotlight PA that he intends to address the practice of political firms having both lobbying and campaign arms.

Though a number of senators use firms like Zaborney’s that do both types of work, several of his colleagues have expressed concern of late about the practice.

“I don’t know what we can do legislatively,” Corman said, adding that he expects legal challenges to anything that passes. “It’s a fair concern.”

Cutler, who authored the last change to Pennsylvania’s lobbyist rules in 2018, spent a decade trying to pass the reforms before finally succeeding. His bill increased financial penalties for lobbyists who don’t file the required public disclosure reports, and it required the reports to be filed electronically and posted online more quickly.

Lobbying disclosure in Pennsylvania remains frustratingly incomplete, however. As it stands, the public cannot currently see how much lobbyists spend to advocate on a specific issue — let alone which lawmakers they lobby. All the public can see is how much a lobbying firm (which often represents multiple clients at once) spends overall.

Cutler’s bill did not address the practice of lobbyists who also work as political consultants. Former state Sen. Scott Wagner [once referred to the practice as “a danger” and a “conflict of interest.”](#) Wagner had talked about introducing legislation to place limits on the practice. It never materialized, and he later hired Zaborney’s company as an ultimately unsuccessful Republican gubernatorial candidate.

Pennsylvania’s campaign finance laws are among the worst in the country and “an absolute embarrassment,” said Borick, of Muhlenberg College, adding that he’s hopeful Corman will move forward on improvements. “It is a worthwhile effort and he deserves credit. It would be a major accomplishment if he were able to do it.”

But he and others are skeptical the legislature will take any meaningful action after decades of ignoring the need for reform, even in the face of multiple, high-profile political scandals.

Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf has for several years proposed a package of good government reforms, including a gift ban, that was never seriously considered by the legislature. But Wolf, in his six years in office, has not made it a public priority when negotiating with GOP lawmakers on top tier policies.

Khalif Ali, executive director of Common Cause Pennsylvania, said it is up to good government groups — and citizens — to remind elected officials of their promises.

“You get accustomed to doing things in a certain way with a low or middle level of accountability,” he said of elected officials. “The higher the accountability, the closer the scrutiny, and that makes people uncomfortable.”

He added: “We have to let our elected officials know that we aren’t interested in more business as usual, but a higher accountability and a government that is more reflective of the people it represents.”

[Companies Pull Back Political Giving Following Capitol Violence](#)

Days after a pro-Trump mob attacked the United States Capitol, some of America’s biggest companies said they would pause political giving as they rethink their support of certain lawmakers and their own involvement in politics more broadly.

Marriott International, Dow, Airbnb and Morgan Stanley were among those that said they would [halt donations](#) from their political action committees, or PACs, [to the 147 Republican members of Congress](#) who objected to certifying the election results on Jan. 6. The plans to object to the results appear to have contributed to the deadly storming of the Capitol that day. AT&T, whose PAC donated the most of any single public company in the 2019-20 election cycle, also said it would suspend contributions to those lawmakers.

At the same time, Facebook, Microsoft, Coca-Cola, Citigroup, JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs said they were pausing PAC donations to both Republican and Democratic candidates for various lengths of time — a tactic that will also penalize those who voted to uphold the election.

The moves are notable because corporations and their employees are active players in the political process, making campaign contributions through PACs and helping politicians raise funds in myriad ways. But it was not clear how long the pause would last — the first quarter is

the slowest period of the cycle — and whether the companies would quietly roll back the changes after public attention had shifted.

In the last election cycle, American corporate PACs gave \$91 million to members of the House of Representatives, accounting for 8 percent of that chamber's total funds raised, and \$27 million to senators, accounting for 3 percent of the total, according to figures compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics.

“Corporate PAC money is usually an arm of the lobbying interests of the corporation and is used to buy access and influence,” said Fred Wertheimer, president of Democracy 21, which advocates for campaign finance reform. “If that were to fundamentally change, and if small donors became a much bigger part of financing elections, we could potentially face a fundamental change in the financing of elections.”

By announcing their intention to withhold funds, companies are signaling to lawmakers that there are growing political and public relations risks to their actions. By the end of Monday, [at least 16](#) companies had put out statements disavowing the events of Wednesday and pledging to use their corporate giving to uphold their principles.

Companies do pause their political contributions sometimes, such as when they are being investigated. But broad initiatives are rare, although this one is at least partly rooted in pragmatism and business savvy.

“I think that some corporations just have been a little bit tone deaf about this,” said Ann M. Ravel, who chaired the Federal Election Commission under former President Barack Obama. “But now, the events of the last week have been so outrageous, and so violent. And the people who were shown trying to undermine our democracy are probably not the kind of people that most corporations want to appeal to.”

Last week, an armed mob, egged on by a disgruntled President Trump, breached the Capitol building as lawmakers were debating whether to certify Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s victory over Mr. Trump in the presidential election. The rioters forced the vice president and lawmakers to be evacuated. [Five people](#), including [a police officer](#), died.

Dow, which took some of the strongest steps, [said](#) it was suspending donations for at least two or six years, depending on the lawmaker's election cycle, “to any member of Congress who voted to object to the certification of the presidential election.”

Hallmark requested the return of campaign contributions that its PAC made to Senators Josh Hawley of Missouri and Roger Marshall of Kansas, who both voted against certifying the presidential election results. “Hallmark believes the peaceful transition of power is part of the bedrock of our democratic system, and we abhor violence of any kind,” the company said in a statement.

Other large companies, including Delta, Walmart and FedEx, said they were monitoring the situation but appeared to stop short of taking any targeted action. .

Lloyd C. Blankfein, the former chief executive of Goldman Sachs, said that the rush by companies to take a stand on political contributions could be shortsighted, given the nature of business.

“I don’t want to minimize the bad outcomes that threaten us all in the waning days of the Trump administration,” he said. “Yet I would be very reluctant to threaten a legislator with a permanent breach over any single issue, recognizing we may need to work together on many other things that will be important to us in the future.”

The pullback in PAC donations will hurt lawmakers unevenly. Sam Graves and Blaine Luetkemeyer, both Republicans from Missouri who objected to certifying Mr. Biden’s election victory, were the House members who were second- and third-most reliant on PAC donations. Their 2020 campaigns were both funded about 80 percent by PAC donations, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics. In the Senate, where the reliance on PAC money is generally lower, Senator Hawley received 7 percent of his recent funds from corporate PACs; for Texas Republican Ted Cruz, probably the highest profile objector to the November election result, the figure was 1 percent.

Corporations spent four years grappling with the volatile Mr. Trump and how best to react to his unpredictable actions, some of which ran counter to the values of their employees and customers. After Mr. Trump’s refusal to commit to a smooth transition, many business leaders began a more sustained conversation about what — if anything — they could do.

On Nov. 23, more than 160 executives [signed a letter](#) demanding a swift presidential transition. Some of the executives discussed withholding donations from the Republican candidates for Senate in Georgia if party leaders did not do more to facilitate the transition.

On Jan. 5, the day before the violence at the Capitol, [senior executives from Merck, Disney, Pfizer, Morgan Stanley](#) and others revisited the notion of withholding contributions in a call with historians and constitutional experts, said two people who participated in the call. A poll of the call’s participants showed that 100 percent believed it was a good idea to privately warn lobbyists that their companies would no longer support election “deniers,” according to a copy of the poll results obtained by The New York Times. Yet no concrete plan emerged.

That changed after Wednesday.

Early Thursday, calls began for corporations to end their support for Republican lawmakers who either supported Mr. Trump’s agenda during his term or objected to certifying the election. Steve Schmidt, a co-founder of the Lincoln Project, a group of conservatives critical of Mr.

Trump, said in a [Twitter post](#) that his organization “will be running a brutal corporate pressure campaign,” targeting boards, chief executives, and companies that helped finance the politicians that may have set off the Capitol attacks. His group had already been pressuring Citi, AT&T and Charles Schwab over their support for Mr. Hawley and Mr. Cruz, who had taken leadership roles in opposing the election certification.

In an interview on Monday, Mr. Schmidt said that companies — including banks like Citi and JPMorgan — that had halted all political donations instead of specifically focusing on the objectors were missing the point.

“The issue isn’t suspending all political donations,” he said. “The issue isn’t even suspending all donations to conservatives who largely supported Donald Trump. The issue is suspending donations to secessionists, people that incited an insurrection.”

Big banks have in the past withheld political donations to convey their disapproval, usually only temporarily. In 2015, Goldman Sachs and PNC Financial Services halted donations to Scott Garrett, a Republican with an influential position on the House Financial Services Committee, after he objected to Republican congressional candidates that were gay. That same year, representatives from Citi, JPMorgan and other big banks met to talk about a coordinated freeze on donations to Senate Democrats in order to express disapproval over Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, a sharp critic of big banks.

[Pro-gun lobbyist: If the Proud Boys show up on Lobby Day, there’s nothing we can do about it](#)

The FBI on Monday [issued a serious warning that all 50 state capitals](#) over the next few weeks are at risk for attacks that are similar to the insurrection that took place at the Capitol Building last week and the attacks could start as early as this weekend.

Before the pandemic and before the “stop the steal” misinformation campaign and movement, 22,000 people, many of them armed, showed up for Lobby Day last year in Richmond. It ended peacefully, then lawmakers got to work passing several gun control measures.

Organizer Philip Van Cleave of the [Virginia Citizens Defense League](#) says what he calls ordinary Americans will be back for [Lobby Day 2021](#).

“Number one, we don’t want any gun control. Our number one effort will be to knock all gun control back. We don’t need any gun control in Virginia,” said Van Cleave.

VCDL failed to get a permit for a massive rally on the grounds, so this year the rally will be on a roll.

“It’s called ‘rolling for the 2a’ — that being the Second Amendment — and we are having caravans of cars coming in from the north, the south, the east and west, and then 9 sub-caravans that will blend into one of the four major caravans,” Van Cleave said.

“The caravans will be led by big buses decked out with gun rights statements and things like that, and so those buses will be arriving in Richmond from 12 noon on the 18th, which is a week from Monday and up to 3 o’clock. So, it’s about noon to four. The four different directions arrive at different times the north at noon, the east around 1, the south around two and west around three,” he said.

But security experts say extremist groups will blend in for a potential repeat of the [Capitol Hill insurrection](#) that left five people dead.

When asked about the prospect of the Proud Boys showing up for the event, Van Cleave said all groups are welcome as long as they obey the law.

“We have no control over [them attending] — there’s nothing I can do. It’s still America. Everybody’s free to walk the streets,” said Van Cleave.

On Tuesday, Virginia State Police opened new [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages to keep citizens posted on security plans for Lobby Day 2021 and the 2021 session of the Virginia General Assembly.

[Coronavirus restrictions force culture change for Maryland lawmakers, lobbyists, activists as session nears](#)

The resurging coronavirus pandemic is forcing a culture shift in the state capital of Annapolis, where in past years the business of lawmaking happened in impromptu hallway meetings and during dinner receptions almost as often as in hearing rooms.

The 442nd session of the Maryland General Assembly that begins Wednesday has been stripped down to a mostly online operation, focused on the basics of approving a state budget and passing laws. Missing will be many of the extras that are hallmarks of the 90-day legislative meeting.

Gone are evening receptions hosted by lobbyists and interest groups. News conferences and rallies are strongly discouraged. There will be no advocates in matching T-shirts watching their lawmakers from the galleries above the legislative chambers.

Championship-winning high school sports teams won’t be marched in front of lawmakers to receive citations and pose for photos. [Student pages won’t don their signature gray blazers](#) to fetch coffee and printouts of vote tallies; they’ll watch from home like almost everyone else.

Some lawmakers are worried the session won't even last until its final scheduled day of April 12. Even with precautions — including regular testing, required masks and far fewer in-person sessions — there's a risk that the coronavirus could run through the 188-member legislature.

"I really am a worrier right now," said Sen. Delores Kelley, a Baltimore County Democrat. "I'm even concerned about whether we can keep a quorum in the General Assembly to get through the session."

It's not an unwarranted concern: The Associated Press has tracked [at least 250 coronavirus infections and seven deaths](#) among state lawmakers in the United States since last spring.

"I am just hoping, really hoping, that we do not get another surge. Because another surge could really throw off everything," said House of Delegates Speaker Adrienne A. Jones, a Baltimore County Democrat.

Jones and her counterpart in the Senate, President Bill Ferguson, have been spent months working out the logistics of how Maryland's 188 lawmakers — 47 senators and 141 delegates — can work safely.

"There is something so powerful, unlike D.C., about the act of Marylanders from across the state convening, the 47 of us being in a place together to work through some of the state's hardest challenges," said Ferguson, a Baltimore Democrat. "In the middle of a pandemic, that's certainly not highly advised."

Initially, full sessions in the State House's legislative chambers will be rare and short. When the Senate meets, it will work from desks surrounded by plexiglass and will be subject to a two-hour time limit.

The larger and more crowded House of Delegates will split between the main chamber in the State House and an "auxiliary chamber" down the street in an office building. The auxiliary chamber has been outfitted with desks and members will be connected by video to the main chamber.

The public won't be allowed in to observe legislative sessions, the number of in-person staffers will be cut down and journalists will be limited to a handful of seats in the balconies.

And all of it will be fully streamed online for the public for the first time.

Lobbyists and activists who are used to testifying in person, prowling the halls and trying to pin down lawmakers after hearings, are having to turn to new tactics to get their messages to lawmakers. Access to the State House buildings is limited to appointments.

Moms Demand Action has in the past used its strength in numbers to make a case for stronger gun control laws. Last year, 427 members in matching red T-shirts crammed together on multiple floors underneath the stained-glass dome of the Miller Senate Office Building to pose for a giant group photo.

This year, the “mothers and others” are turning to social media and Zoom calls with lawmakers. Danielle Veith, chapter president for Maryland, said she has a goal of setting up video meetings between lawmakers and constituents in each district.

It helps, she said, that the Moms Demand Action movement was born online.

“We’re comfortable in the online medium,” Veith said. “I think social media will be critical in getting out our message. That’s something that our moms love to do.”

The state’s teachers union has gone online for lobbying, too, with Zoom receptions for lawmakers. Teachers have had plenty of experience shifting from in-person to online already with virtual teaching, said Cheryl Bost, a Baltimore County teacher who is president of the Maryland State Education Association.

And sometimes, Bost said, “the good old phone call” may be what works best.

Having lawmakers’ cellphone numbers may prove to be a crucial advantage for lobbyists and activists.

Some may have been cautious about texting lawmakers before, but “it’s going to become a regular way of communicating now,” predicted Ann Ciekot, a lobbyist and partner with Public Policy Partners in Annapolis.

As president of the Maryland Government Relations Association, Ciekot shared the concerns of the lobbying corps with General Assembly leaders.

While Ciekot looks forward to one day being able to walk the halls again, stopping in offices to remind lawmakers of her clients’ bills, she thinks some of the changes may have lasting benefits. It’s a positive development that written testimony can be uploaded from home, instead of having to go to a terminal in a committee hearing room, she said. And live videos of voting sessions will be a plus, too.

But everything, she said, is going to be an adjustment.

“We’re all in this together and we’re all figuring it out,” Ciekot said. “None of us is 100% happy with the way things are, but we’ll have to deal with it. We’re going to have to be patient and we’re going to have to be flexible.”

The pace of the session also could be quicker than usual. In a typical year, it takes a few weeks for lawmakers to get in a groove, as they spend their days drafting bills and receiving briefings before delving into bill hearings and policy debates.

This year, they'll jump right into hearings. Though none are scheduled Wednesday, there are more than 60 hearings planned for Thursday.

Lawmakers are still adjusting to the new procedures. Though there have been committee meetings online since the end of the 2020 session last March, there hasn't been the day-after-day crush of hearings.

The House of Delegates Environment and Transportation Committee did a dry run last week, gathering on Zoom and [broadcasting the meeting](#) on the General Assembly's website.

Del. Kumar Barve, the committee chairman, proposed a fake bill on "the prohibition on profit-making in Montgomery County" to work the kinks out of online roll call and voice votes. Lawmakers chuckled their way through the roll call, with the livestream showing them in their offices and living rooms as their names were called.

Barve, a Montgomery County Democrat, cautioned his committee members that procedures may need to be tweaked once the session starts and real votes are taken.

"This is new to us, and for the first week, we're going to be feeling our way," he said.

