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[\\$97 million of influence: lobbyists are fixtures at the Capitol, pushing their message amid rules on gifts, perks, receptions](#)

A wide array of companies, groups, and associations, well known and obscure, representing a range of issues that included property taxes, recycling, cable TV, dental insurance, state employee unions, railroads, prisons, and pollution, spent \$97 million last year, up from \$75 million in 2011-2012, to advance, or to stop, legislation affecting their special interests.

It turned out to be a pretty good bet.

Las Vegas-based MGM Resorts International spent \$7.2 million from 2016 through 2018 to assemble a team of lawyer-lobbyists and pollsters to lobby legislators and regulators over MGM's proposed waterfront casino in Bridgeport.

MGM hasn't yet gotten what it wants in Connecticut. But its tentacles in Connecticut and Washington D.C. are influencing the debate over whether the state should abandon its compact with the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot tribes and open up off-reservation casino development to competitive bidding among qualified developers. With the tribes' casino project in East Windsor stalled, MGM commissioned a poll this month that said about 70 percent of Nutmeggers favor casino competition.

While MGM is on a one-issue quest, the Connecticut Hospital Association in Wallingford quietly battles each legislative session on a broader healthcare front. With a team of in-house lobbyists, the member-supported CHA racked up \$9.7 million in lobbying expenses, mostly on salaries and campaigns from 2015 through 2018 -- an effort aimed recently at stopping a local tax on non-profit hospitals.

It's as ubiquitous as the air in the Legislative Office Building: Every January the lobbying effort revs up to a fever pitch and doesn't stop until the final roll call.

This session, the race to gain an edge promises to be even more frenetic, propelled by highly charged issues: tolls, recreational pot, sports betting, casinos, paid family leave, a \$15 minimum wage, vaping, gun control, access to abortion, taxes. and the budget.

With a new governor and 40 new legislators, lobbyists will be scrambling just to make connections.

"It's going to take a while to get to know the new faces, let alone asking them to vote yes or no on a particular issue," said Jay Malcynsky, co-founder of Gaffney Bennett in New Britain, a lawyer and one of the most experienced lobbyists on the circuit.

"Connecticut has always had a hands-on way of doing business. You're going to see a lot of people this session with the CBIA legislative handbook in their hands, trying to figure out who's on first," he said.

While the vast bulk of the millions of lobbying dollars are spent on the salaries of the “communicators” themselves, and advertising, there are still enough opportunities for gifts and perks and travel to jiggle the needle on a lawmaker’s moral compass.

A key reform in recent years did change the complexion of the game: The advent of public campaign financing took lobbyists out of the fundraising business and limited their influence on candidates. Considered restricted donors, they can contribute up to \$100 per campaign to a candidate.

While there are substantial restrictions on gifts from lobbyists to lawmakers, there is a sizable exception. A lobbyist can, from his or her personal account, give a legislator up to \$1,000 for each of several “life events” per year -- a wedding, funeral, birth or adoption, and religious induction to adulthood.

Companies and groups can also make large gifts of thousands of dollars directly to a state agency, and the agency can do what it wants with the money, as long as it’s used on state property and benefits the state.

Each session, staffers in the Office of State Ethics sit the freshman legislators down and school them on the restrictions and reporting requirements.

“It reaffirmed some things for me and taught me something new,” Rep. Nicole Klarides-Ditria, R-Seymour, said of the ethics session. “And we have our caucus that we can run questions by if we’re unsure of anything.”

In any case, she said, “Wine and crackers at a reception isn’t going to change my mind -- information will change my mind.”

One rule that is often in play relates to conferences. A lawmaker can accept “necessary expenses” from the sponsor of a conference -- travel to the event, lodging and meals -- if he or she has an active role, such as that of a guest speaker or moderator of a panel.

But the reality is that the conferences tend to be held in desirable places, such as the New England Cable and Telecommunications Association’s \$16,000 event at Gurney’s Newport Resort & Marina last July -- and Newport is Newport.

Among the lawmakers and state officials who participated in panel discussions at the Newport event were Klarides-Ditria, who had \$1,820 in expenses paid for by the association, her sister, Rep. Themis Klarides, the House Republican leader, who had \$1,384 in expenses paid by the group, and Rep. Matt Ritter, the House Majority Leader, with \$990 in expenses paid. The lawmakers disclosed the payment as an allowable benefit.

The association has been an active force against state-level Internet regulation. It’s website describes the 2018 convention this way:

“Our primary goal at this year’s convention was to bring our industry members together for an informative, enjoyable, and celebratory experience: from our beautiful location on Goat Island, to new speakers and dining experiences, to evening sunsets and harbor cruises!”

All three participated in panel discussions, and each said they saw the conference as a good way to connect with elected leaders of the other New England states and exchange information on regional issues.

“It was the first time I was invited to anything,” said Klarides-Ditria. “I went to learn all I could.”

The three-day conference was listed in state ethics records as a lobbying event, as opposed to educational, but Themis Klarides, a fixture in the Naugatuck Valley who represents Derby, Woodbridge and Orange, said there's some of both in most of these functions.

State Rep. Themis Klarides. (Stephen Dunn / Hartford Courant)

"Lobbying isn't a bad word," she said. "I lobby people every day. Still, I'll pick and choose which ones I go to. Is it going to help me do my job? I'm not a huge conference goer -- I want to know I'm going to get something out of it."

Like Klarides-Ditria and Klarides, Ritter, who represents Hartford, said he's too busy during the session to go to out-of-state conferences. He said the annual cable and telecommunications event is seen as a particularly useful forum.

"It's a longstanding conference and you're there with representatives of major employers and leaders of other states talking about budgets and transportation. For me, it's helpful to get their perspective in person -- but no conference is going to sway how I view things," said Ritter.

Clients and their lobbyists employ several strategies to get their message out. MGM has multiple lobbyists and law firms to pursue different targets -- the governor, the attorney general, the Senate and House committee chairs, the Washington, D.C. regulators, and Congress.

MGM's competition in Connecticut is far from awestruck. The tribes' joint venture to develop the East Windsor casino -- MMCT Venture -- spent \$1.2 million on lobbying efforts last year, 6th most in the state. In a statement earlier this week, MMCT said that the tribes' regular payments to the state in December exceeded MGM's December gaming revenue at its new casino in Springfield. MGM did not respond to requests for comment.

Connecticut's auto dealers also employed multiple lobbyists when they pushed back against Tesla's plan to sell directly to the customer.

Linda Kowalski, another seasoned pro and leader of The Kowalski Group, LLC, said there's a lot more to lobbying than face-time with lawmakers.

She said lobbyists help their clients to build coalitions and grassroots campaigns and reach the public through digital marketing.

A lot of clients rely on Hartford fixtures like Malcynsky to mine connections old and new.

"It's helpful to bring constituents into the discussion so legislators can see how it affects their district. You have to be ready for everything. You're on feet and you're going to wear out a lot of shoe leather," Malcynsky said.

State Rep. Matt Ritter. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

Receptions, held in rooms within the Legislative Office Building, bring people together in one place. There are dozens each session, with hosts such as the wine merchants, the casino industry, and Dunkin Donuts.

If the value of the food and refreshments is under \$30 for each person, the sponsor doesn't have to report the attendance of legislators. Over \$30, they do, and the cap is \$50.

"You're looking to meet people," said Malcynsky, "There's not a lot of heavy lifting going on."

Ritter said there has to be a structure to the clamor for access.

Lobbyists "call my office, speak with Jessica, we block out days, you book time. People get 20 minutes. We walk through your issue and go onto the next meeting," said Ritter.

He's an expert himself on some topics, less so on others.

"I don't have any farms in Hartford but I still meet with the farm bureau. People in my caucus have farms and I want to be helpful."

Missouri lawmakers wrestling with Amendment 1's transparency requirement

Far and away the most contentious and publicly contested component in the Amendment 1 Clean Missouri ballot measure passed by voters in November is its overhaul of the way voting districts are drawn up.

Most Democrats supported the proposal, with the notable exception of the Legislative Black Caucus, while most members of the GOP, including the Missouri Republican Party, solidified opposition to it.

Its supporters claimed it would prevent either party from gaining an unfair advantage while opponents contended it favored Democrats. Republican Governor Mike Parson told the Associated Press that he wants Amendment 1 repealed over its redistricting portion.

But lawmakers started to pay attention to another section of the measure after it passed, the portion that affected them directly on a day-to-day basis.

As written, Amendment 1 subjects records of official activities of the House and Senate, their committees as well as individual lawmakers and their staffs to the state's "Sunshine Law" that requires openness in government.

Every lawmaker is now a custodian of records who is responsible for responding to public records requests for documents and information from their office. That means 34 Senators and 163 Representatives are the keepers of records for themselves and their staffs.

The Chief Clerk of the House and Secretary of the Senate are custodians for records pertaining to each chamber.

Dana Rademan Millier has been Chief Clerk of the Missouri House since late October. She says a major priority is establishing guidelines for lawmakers, who as custodians of records, will have to establish their own retention policies for documents such as emails. "I think it's important that they have options available and some best practices because they're really going to need to have some sort of retention policies, based on the new constitutional provisions that were enacted," said Rademan Millier.

She said she's been meeting with the secretary of state's office to get assistance in establishing standards to comply with the Sunshine Law. Rademan Miller stated that the secretary's office told her that lawmakers probably aren't destroying information such as email too quickly, but are likely retaining it longer than needed in order to reference the data it contains.

Some lawmakers have made statements that constituents personal information communicated to them will become public record. Rademan Miller says further clarification of the "Sunshine Law" will determine if such a contention is true. "I think it's a gray area with the plain reading of the sunshine law," Rademan Miller said. "There are exemptions there, but there's definitely not like a blanket provision that provides an exemption for all constituent correspondence."

Chapter 610 in Missouri law is the foundation of the Sunshine Law. It includes [24 provisions](#) in which records can be closed to the public. They include instances such as welfare cases and mental or physical health proceedings involving identifiable persons as well as individually identifiable personnel records.

Rademan Miller thinks the wording of Chapter 610 is open to interpretation and will need to be resolved through a legal or legislative process. “The courts at some point maybe have to sort it out unless the legislature decides to act and amend the law and try to clarify some provisions which they may do,” said Rademan Miller. She noted that although Amendment 1 is a constitutional amendment, it places lawmakers under a statute, the Sunshine Law, which can be revised.

Missouri’s Sunshine Law dates back to 1973 following the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in 1966 by the U.S. Congress.

Some state lawmakers are weighing in with concerns, including Republican Representative Nick Schroer of O’Fallon, who thinks some media sources could expose confidential emails because of Amendment 1.

Republican Representative Jean Evans of Manchester says Amendment 1 wrote out any exemptions to public disclosure.

Other components of Amendment 1 Clean Missouri that apply to state lawmakers include a requirement that they wait two years before becoming lobbyists. The measure also eliminates lobbyist gifts of more than \$5 to lawmakers and limits campaign donations to \$2,500 for Senate candidates and \$2,000 to House candidates. It further bars fundraising activity in any building or property owned by the state.

The provision calling for a two-year waiting period before becoming lobbyists led to early resignations by several lawmakers before Amendment 1 went into effect in early December. Among them was Democratic Senator Jake Hummel of St. Louis. Hummel lost his primary for reelection and would have exited the legislature in January anyway. But as the Missouri AFL-CIO’s secretary-treasurer, he said he wanted to be sure he would be able to file as a lobbyist if he was called on to do so.

Missouri voters resoundingly approved Amendment 1 by a 62%-to-38% margin.

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[Virginia investor working to curb Dominion's influence](#)

Rich people using their wealth to try to influence politics is nothing new, but not many launch multimillion-dollar crusades against their local electric company.

That's just what Charlottesville investor and Democratic donor Michael Bills is doing in Virginia, where's he's taking on Dominion Energy, the state's largest electric utility and most politically powerful corporation.

It's a David versus Goliath story, if both of them had a bunch of money.

Dominion has had a major say in writing Virginia energy laws for years, helping shape a regulatory scheme Wall Street analysts have called one of the most utility-friendly in the country. Critics say Dominion has used its political muscle to overcharge customers by billions of dollars and stifle competition. Dominion says it's an engaged corporate citizen with a strong record of providing reasonably priced, reliable power.

Bills said Dominion has effectively captured the General Assembly to boost profits. The result, he said, isn't just overpaid Dominion executives, unnecessarily high electric bills and bad environmental policy, but a deep rot in the democratic process.

"The structural problem is that Dominion has insidious influence," Bills told The Associated Press.

Bills is funding a group called Clean Virginia that plans to spend about \$8 million to \$10 million on a lobbying and public relations campaign over several years. Those efforts include running targeted ads in key lawmakers' districts to counter Dominion's sway.

Well-known billionaire activists such as Michael Bloomberg and Charles and David Koch, and lesser known politically active billionaires such as Missouri's Rex Sinquefeld, have used their wealth to support a broad range of candidates and causes, but Bills said he hasn't seen a targeted advocacy group like Clean Virginia.

Clean Virginia is calling for a law to prevent electric monopolies, including Dominion and the state's second largest electric utility, Appalachian Power, from donating directly to candidates.

Last year, Clean Virginia pledged to give sitting House members \$5,000 per election cycle and senators \$20,000 per election cycle if they refused donations from Dominion or its executives. This year, the group is running ads critical of Dominion's political influence in top legislators' districts.

Bills also successfully pushed the League of Conservation Voters — a major contributor to Democratic gubernatorial candidates in the last two elections — to ban major donations to candidates who take Dominion money. Bills said he also plans to discuss a similar arrangement with California environmentalist Tom Steyer, whose group has spent heavily in recent Virginia elections.

The efforts appear to be having an effect. Several veteran Democrats have recently said they will no longer take Dominion money, joining several new Democratic candidates who pledged to refuse Dominion money in the 2017 election and have taken donations from Clean Virginia. Attorney General Mark Herring, who plans to run for governor in 2021 and has previously accepted more than \$130,000 from Dominion, is the most prominent Democrat to recently announce he's swearing off the utility's cash.

Bills' hard-elbowed tactics have won fans among progressives but also criticism that he's trying to buy off politicians himself.

"On behalf of our nearly 10,000 Virginia employees we engage in the political process. So does this one wealthy individual. The difference is his donations are contingent on doing exactly what he says," said Dominion spokesman David Botkins.

House Minority Leader Eileen Filler-Corn, whose district is being targeted by Clean Virginia's new ad campaign, said Bills' aggressive advocacy has split Democrats.

"Do I think this divides the caucus? Arguably yes," she said.

Bills said he has no hidden agenda, profit motive or political ambitions. He said he decided to give a rare interview because he wanted to make clear his motives.

"I'd prefer to not be in the press, I'd prefer to not be fighting this fight, but I feel like I have the ability to do it, and I recognize how important it is," Bills said.

Bills, 61, grew up in Hampton while his father served in the Air Force. He went to the University of Virginia before heading to Wall Street. He founded an investment partnership fund that he still runs today. The \$1.5 billion fund has about 100 investors and Bills said he knows of no potential conflict between the fund's investments and Dominion. Bills said it's fair to assume he's a multimillionaire, but said his rate of charitable giving will assure he does not die a wealthy man.

Bills has long given money to Democratic candidates in Virginia but said only in recent years has he started taking a keen interest in utility policy. He said his interest in environmental issues — such as why Virginia lagged neighboring states in solar energy — led to him to pay more attention to Dominion's influence in state politics.

Besides its large campaign contributions, Dominion has a small army of well-connected lobbyists and is a frequent landing spot for high-level officials leaving state government. It also gives generously to politically connected charities and advocacy groups and spent thousands taking lawmakers to the Masters golf tournament or Washington Redskins games before a gift ban became law.

Lawmakers last year approved a sweeping electric regulations overhaul Dominion said was needed to upgrade the electric grid and boost clean energy production. The regulations also make it nearly impossible for its rates to be decreased. In 2015, the company helped write and pass a bill Dominion said protected customers from environmental compliance costs but state regulators said led to hundreds of millions of dollars in overcharges.

[Upheaval in state legislature creates opportunities for lobbyists](#)

A new legislative session at the Capitol in Albany always presents opportunities for lobbyists and their clients hoping to influence state government. But lobbyists entered relatively uncharted waters in January.

The difference is the new Democratic majority in the state Senate, which wrested the chamber away from Republicans to return New York to one-party rule for the first time since 2009.

"This is a totally new dynamic for lobbyists and ... anyone who has business before the state," said former Assemblyman Keith Wright, now the director of government relations at Davidoff Hutcher & Citron.

And in Albany, where relationships are a key to getting business done, Wright joked that firms with strong ties to the Senate Democrats are "probably uncorking a lot of champagne and are ready to party."

After being in the minority for the past eight years, he said, "This is (the Democratic-affiliated firms') time to shine."

One of the firms closely linked to the Senate Democratic Conference is the Parkside Group, which was heavily involved in the electoral victories that led to the conference winning 39 seats, the largest majority in decades.

The lobbying firm is expected to have greater sway in the chamber during the legislative session, although Parkside partner Evan Stavisky declined to comment on the new dynamic.

Conversely, lobbying firms that have in recent years banked on their ties to the Senate Republicans could find themselves on the outside.

Because of the power transition in the Senate, a contract lobbyist remarked, "Everyone is trying to get in and act like they've been there with these guys all along now."

There will also be new relationships forged. On both sides of the aisle, more than a quarter of the chamber's members are new, and influential veteran senators — including Democrat Jeff Klein and Republicans Carl Marcellino and Kemp Hannon — are out of office.

Wright described the turnover as a "revolution."

Before the power shift, one lobbyist said there was a certain level of predictability about where senators would fall on key issues.

Almost immediately after Election Day, lobbyists were scrambling to forge alliances with the incoming class of 15 new Democrats. "There are a lot of people to get to know," remarked an independent lobbyist, who like most lobbyists wanted to remain anonymous when discussing this aspect of business at the Capitol.

And all of new Democrats ascended to positions of powers, taking on leadership roles on committee and subcommittees.

The turnover will also be seen at the staff level. Senate Democrats now get the perk of filling the behind-the-scenes jobs that make the chamber function. New senators and staff members will have much to learn. Almost immediately, they were tossed into the three-month budget process at the start of the session.

Some lobbyists rejected the notion that the fresh faces will give firms extra power to exert their will, but at least one veteran lobbyist expected legislative staffers will look for outside help to draft legislation.

Nearly \$130 million was spent lobbying state and local governments in New York during the first six months of last year, an increase of 6.7 percent from the same period in 2017, and it's expected to increase in this year's legislative session.

The vast majority of the spending during this period, about \$113 million, went toward compensation for retained and in-house lobbyists, according to data compiled by the state Joint Commission on Public Ethics. Approximately \$4.7 million was spent on advertising, almost \$789,000 on events and the rest for lobbying-related costs.

The biggest single spender on lobbying was the health care workers union 1199 SEIU, which spent \$3.6 million. Other top spenders included the Greater New York Hospital Association at \$2.28 million, the New York State Nurses Association at \$1.4 million, and Uber at \$1.3 million.

Health care interests will likely be spending even more this year, as a potential government takeover of health care in New York could be a major topic of discussion among progressives during the legislative session.

"The issues are going to change because the political dynamics are changing in the Legislature," said Stavisky.

In addition to the partisan issues, there are initiatives like gambling expansion that will garner significant lobbying spending by interested parties.

When it comes to good government reforms, such as transparency measures and campaign finance changes, there are less likely to be deep-pocketed interests lining up a team of lobbyists to influence the process.

The shifting power in Albany has also altered the legislative process, which is traditionally dominated by the budget for the first three months of the year and ends in June with any remaining major policy items.

"This year has the potential to break that up a bit," Stavisky said.

As he predicted before the legislative session, the Senate, in conjunction with the Assembly, got off to a fast start addressing items stymied by Republican control, including the adoption of electoral reforms and expanding LGBTQ rights.

Next week the Legislature is schedule to pass bills codifying abortion protections and overhauling public education.

[Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold takes aim at ‘massive secret political spending’](#)

Those seeking to limit the influence of money in Colorado politics can only do so much.

Reformers would love to limit campaign expenditures, for example, but the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that states can't impose any mandatory limits on how much candidates and outside groups spend, nor can they change the fact that tax-exempt "527" political groups and independent expenditure committees can accept virtually unlimited contributions and conceal much about where their money comes from.

That's how, in 2018, Colorado ended up with a governor who dropped more than \$23 million in personal cash on his race, and saw its most heated ballot issue, Prop. 112, drown in a 50-to-1 spending deluge by oil and gas industry interests over anti-fracking activists. It's how nearly a quarter of a billion dollars was spent overall on the past election, shattering the previous state record.

But while reformers are relatively powerless to stop big money, campaign finance experts say there's significant opportunity to increase transparency in elections, so that citizens can at least be better informed about who's trying to tip the scales.

Colorado's new secretary of state, Democrat Jena Griswold, says campaign finance transparency is one of her primary focuses. She spoke on that and other priorities during a presentation to state legislators on Thursday.

"We can't have our voices drowned out by massive secret political spending. Coloradans deserve to know who is trying to influence their vote and how they are trying to do it," Griswold said.

"We must bring transparency to the millions and millions of dollars used to influence our elections."

Political action committees in Colorado can buy up ads and mailers without ever disclosing where their money comes from, as long as they don't explicitly advocate for a particular candidate or position. Many groups exploit this loophole to attack or promote certain candidates and ideas while keeping their donor bases secret. The Colorado Sun [recently highlighted](#) more than \$600,000 in spending on commercials condemning Republican U.S. Rep. Scott Tipton that never mentioned there was an election coming up or endorsed his opponent. Where the money came from remains a mystery.

Of course, Griswold can't advance her policy goals on that front without the cooperation of the legislature. But, unlike in recent years, there's no split at the Capitol; Democrats now control state government, and campaign finance reform measures previously shot down are beginning

to re-emerge as lawmakers take aim at a system that allows unlimited spending with limited accountability.

Colorado is highly regarded as one of the easiest states in the nation in which to register and to vote. But Paul S. Ryan, a campaign finance watchdog at Common Cause — the same outfit from which Griswold just poached her new deputy, Jenny Flanagan — says that Colorado is just “middle of the pack” with regard to campaign finance transparency.

“There’s certainly room for improvement,” Ryan said. “There’s lots of potential, on firm constitutional footing, to shine light, to require disclosure of who’s raising and spending money to influence not only elections but lobbying-related disclosure, for example.”

Griswold identified a series of ways she believes the state can improve transparency:

- “Require disclosure of secret political spending”
- “Expand the ‘paid for by’ disclosure requirements on political advertisements”
- “Exercise the Secretary of State’s audit and enforcement power to act on campaign finance, ballot access, and lobbyist violations”
- “Prevent potential candidates from raising millions of dollars in unchecked and uncapped contributions into ‘independent’ committees designed to support them when they officially declare their candidacy” (That’s something Jeb Bush famously did prior to the 2016 presidential election.)
- “Ensure that independent expenditure and other committees can be held accountable for campaign finance violations”
- “Work to end the influence of powerful interest groups and lobbyists over candidates and elected officials through contributions to political entities”

Democrats, with their newfound power, say they plan to take the reins this session on campaign finance reform. Already, Rep. Emily Sirota of Denver has filed a bill to limit campaign contributions in county races to \$1,250 per person in the primary and general elections — that bill just passed out of committee — and Sen. Rachel Zenzinger of Arvada has teamed with Aurora Rep. Mike Weissman and Centennial Republican Rep. Jack Tate on a bill to expand disclosure rules regarding electioneering communications. Both those efforts are revivals of legislation previously killed under a split legislature.

“I expect that you’ll see more legislation on this from the Democratic caucus in both the House and the Senate,” Weissman said, “because we do believe it’s a priority. Voters of all parties, and no party, have said they’re tired of the influence of money — particularly money that can’t be traced or is hard to trace — in politics.”

Added Sirota, “Among our constituents, among voters, there is certainly suspicion about the corrupting influences of money in politics. ... I think there’s an appetite among a number of members to do more to show voters, at a minimum, some transparency to preserve the integrity of our electoral system.”

[Bill aims to reduce the amount lobbyists must report spending on lawmakers](#)

One veteran Republican lawmaker only wants lobbyists to have to disclose the price of what it costs to feed elected officials at luncheons and other events, not the actual cost of admission to the event that the lobbyist paid.

Rep. John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills, has introduced [House Bill 2038](#) to do just that. The law currently requires lobbyists to disclose what was spent for a politician or government employee to attend. For instance, if a lobbyist buys a table of 10 seats at a business group's luncheon for \$5,000 and invites a legislator as a guest, the lobbyist is required to report spending \$500 on that lawmaker. However, Kavanagh's bill would change the law so that only the price of food and beverages would be disclosed.

"It's not really a transparency bill," Kavanagh told the *Mirror*. He instead said his goal is to fix inequalities in how this money is reported.

Others don't see it that way.

"We're very confused as to why anybody wants this," Joel Edman, executive director for Arizona Advocacy, a group that often lobbies for transparency, said. "Most of these events are not about the food and drinks, it's about who you're sitting with and who you're talking to."

Kavanagh introduced similar legislation last year, but it was [vetoed by Gov. Doug Ducey](#) because it included a provision that exempted educational events from the definition of "gift" under Arizona's gift clause.

This time, that provision is missing.

Tickets vs Food

Politicians are frequent guests at events where prominent speakers may be, usually with their admission paid for by a lobbyist or special interest group.

As Kavanagh sees it, it is unfair for two politicians who attended the same event as guests of lobbyists to have those lobbyists report spending different amounts on each politician, simply because one has a better seat, and thus a more expensive ticket.

A ticket near the stage may cost \$500 but one in the back may only cost \$100. So, instead of requiring disclosure of the amount the ticket cost, Kavanagh wants only the price of food and drinks reported.

"It's just fair," he said.

However, Edman sees it a bit differently.

Edman said it would be "misleading" if lobbyists reported spending only \$20 for food for a lawmaker when \$20 isn't even enough to get in the door at such events.

Additionally Edman took issue with calling the differences in table prices unfair.

"There's a reason why the tables up front cost more than the tables in the back," Edman said, adding that these sort of events are usually about access to VIPs and so politicians can see and be seen with political players.

"(Lawmakers) at the more expensive tables have more options than the ones at the cheaper tables, so it makes sense to know... what it really costs them," Edman said.

Kavanagh's bill also states that the person or lobbyist who invites the officials is the one responsible for tallying up the costs and reporting the expenses.

Kavanagh was asked to sponsor the bill by the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce. Mike Huckins, a lobbyist for the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, said he hopes critics of the bill look beyond it.

"It creates uniformity in reporting amounts for elected officials who attend events," Huckins said.

Huckins said sometimes tables that are right next to each other can have vastly different amounts due to member fees and other things that can come into play.

As for the issue of access?

“Access is not a reportable expenditure,” Huckins said, adding that the bill is “trying to get this objective nature out of this particular reporting requirement.”

The way these dinners and luncheons are reported is fairly new, as well.

In 2013, the [Secretary of State’s Office released a new lobbyist handbook](#) which detailed how lobbyists or groups are supposed to report these types of expenses.

The handbook gives an example of what to do if a lobbyist invited five members of the legislature to sit at her \$10,000 table of ten people.

The expenditure would include the actual cost of the table divided by each seat and not including non-legislators. So, each legislator would have \$1,000 attributed to their name, according to the handbook.

Prior to the 2013 change, there wasn’t much guidance for how lobbyists should report such spending.

Huckins also stressed that the costs of food won’t be “lowballed,” and said the average cost per person at the events his organization hosts is between \$50 to \$100.

[Outgoing state officials turn to lobbying under lax Michigan rules](#)

As a candidate for governor last year, former Lt. Gov. Brian Calley proposed ending the “revolving door” in state government by prohibiting state officials from working as paid lobbyists for two years.

Two days after leaving office, Calley registered as a lobbyist after landing a new job as president of the Small Business Association of Michigan, where he says lobbying will be only a small part of his larger role at the advocacy and member services organization.

The 41-year-old Calley is among at least seven former state officials and lawmakers who have registered as lobbyists or joined lobbying firms since leaving office at the end of 2018. Many had voted for or co-sponsored “cooling-off period” bills that would have prevented them from jumping straight into lobbying, including former Senate Appropriations Chairman Dave Hildenbrand, a Lowell Republican who joined a multi-client firm and will be paid to influence policy and budget decisions.

The recent moves highlight that Michigan is among a minority of states that do not ban recent legislators, department heads or executive officials from immediately taking paid jobs to lobby former colleagues in the government they just left.

Restrictions in other states and Congress, while occasionally weakened by loopholes, are designed to reduce ethical conflicts. Those include the potential for interest groups to promise future jobs to officials in exchange for preferential treatment while they are still in office.

Ethics laws seek to “ensure that public officials are acting in the public interest,” which helps build trust that is essential in a democracy, said Nicholas Birdsong, a policy associate with the Center for Ethics in Government at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

“Revolving door prohibitions, more particularly, exist to prevent public officials — and employees in some cases — from acting against the interests of the citizens they are sworn to serve,” he said.

Michigan prohibits lawmakers from resigning to take lobbyist jobs during the term they had been elected to, but its lack of broader restrictions is one of many reasons the state [got an "F"](#) on the Center of Public Integrity's 2015 government transparency and accountability report card.

High ranking, highly recruited

Twenty-six states have a one-year cooling-off period before lawmakers can become lobbyists, while 11 have a two-year period. Some states also have temporary lobbying moratoriums for legislative staffers. In Florida, voters recently approved a ballot measure that will ban lawmakers from lobbying for six years, which will be the longest period of its kind when it takes effect.

“Even when there isn’t anything that’s arguably unethical going on, some members of the public have this heightened level of skepticism when it comes to legislator-lobbyist relationships — financial relationships especially,” Birdsong said. “These mandatory cooling-off periods create a barrier.”

Experts say high-ranking officials who leave office are often highly sought after — and well paid — by interest groups because of their personal connections to other government actors. Calley, a Portland Republican, recently got two hours of exclusive face time with new Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, who [gave him a ride](#) to a joint appearance in Grand Rapids.

“A lot of people would honestly love to have that face-to-face contact with a governor,” said James Strickland, a political science researcher at the University of Michigan who has studied the “revolving door” phenomenon. “For any lobbyist or any advocate, that’s very special time.”

Calley said the carpool discussion briefly touched on the Small Business Association of Michigan's support for a [new executive directive Whitmer signed](#) to help businesses in “geographically disadvantaged” regions have a better shot at landing contracts or supply deals with state government.

Mostly, they caught up and discussed the gubernatorial transition, the former lieutenant governor said. Whitmer gave him a ride, he suggested, “as a goodwill gesture, sending a message to people that are not Democrats that she’s serious about reaching across the aisle and forming relationships.”

The only thing he lobbied for, Calley told The Detroit News, was for Whitmer to allow her chief of staff JoAnne Huls to replace outdated wallpaper in her Romney Building office that Calley had previously occupied.

Whitmer's lobbyist insiders

The conservative Michigan Freedom Fund has criticized Whitmer for appointing administration officials who were lobbyists or have lobbyist ties, including Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Director Orlene Hawks, whose husband owns a multi-client firm that lobbies for marijuana companies regulated by the agency.

Department of Natural Resources Director Daniel Eichinger previously lobbied for the Michigan United Conservation Clubs. Michigan Department of Environmental Quality Director Liesl Clark had lobbied the Legislature on behalf of her own green energy policy consulting firm.

“These appointments raise serious questions about conflicts of interest and regular Michiganders’ ability to get a fair shake from their state government,” said Freedom Fund President Terri Reid.

Reid previously worked for GOP former Gov. Rick Snyder, who had also hired lobbyists to fill key posts. Two Snyder appointees this year have already gone to work for lobbying firms, while others have taken advocacy positions that may not require registration.

Whitmer signed an executive directive this month seeking to ensure department directors and executive branch staffers place constitutional compliance and ["the highest ethical principles above private gain."](#) Any use of confidential information they acquired in state government "for personal gain or benefit" could prompt an investigation.

"We are setting the highest conflict of interest standards that any administration has ever had," Whitmer said, noting her administration includes appointees from the business community, state government and people who worked on "the front lines on behalf of public education, but had to file as lobbyists during that time."

Mark Burton, the governor's chief strategist, was a registered lobbyist through August 2017 and represented the Tri-County Alliance for Public Education.

"I think the most important thing is that we conduct ourselves to high standards, that we are transparent when we do and that we hold people accountable," Whitmer said. "And that's going to happen under my administration."

Appointing lobbyists to government posts can be problematic because "the honest fact is we don't have any kind of financial disclosure law," said Craig Mauger, a watchdog with the Michigan Campaign Finance Network.

Michigan is one of two states that does not require lawmakers and state officials to [disclose their personal financial interests](#). Some departments have disclosure policies of their own.

The Whitmer administration is doing a "full review of conflict of interest policies and procedures," said spokeswoman Tiffany Brown, calling it part of an "ongoing effort to set high expectations, strict ethical standards and consistency across the executive branch."

Legislator lobbyists

Recent officials can be valuable lobbyists because they have relationships with people who still serve, know how business is conducted behind the scenes and understand how committees are governed, Strickland said. But that knowledge “expires” over time, he said.

Knowing people on the “inside” makes it easier for former legislators to get meetings with government officials or staffers, which “is something necessary for any lobbyist to be effective,” Strickland said.

Hildenbrand last week officially joined Kelly Cawthorne, a lobbying firm with a lengthy list of clients that includes Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, DTE Energy, Ford Motor Co., private prison company The Geo Group, Walmart, American Express, Auto Owners Insurance and school districts, according to state records.

While he is still figuring out his role at the firm, Hildenbrand told The News he plans to use his experience and relationships developed during a 14-year legislative career ended by term limits.

"I've tried to build a reputation of service and integrity, and I'm going to bring that into the private sector in government affairs as well," said Hildenbrand, 45. "I'm not serving voters directly anymore, but certainly what we do does impact a lot of people."

Hildenbrand voted for a 2009 bill that would have prevented lawmakers from becoming lobbyists for two years but recalls the measure as a "political maneuver" by House Democrats that he was "conflicted" over at the time.

"I didn't think it was necessary, but if I had voted no, people would have asked me, 'What, are you angling to become a government affairs official or a lobbyist when you get done?' It was one of those things where you're criticized no matter which way you vote."

Calley, whose wife serves in the state House, said 100 to 150 people or organizations contacted him about potential jobs between August and January. He said he initially resisted the discussions but decided to join the small business group "very, very late" in the process. He declined to lay out the specific timeline.

Because he'll be involved in public policy debates, Calley said it was appropriate for him to register as a lobbyist. But SBAM has a separate full-time lobbyist who will more regularly interact with government officials, he said.

"There's a big difference between having to register as an executive of an association and a person whose profession is lobbying the Legislature," Calley said when asked whether he still supports the lobbying moratorium he proposed as a 2018 gubernatorial candidate and co-sponsored as a state lawmaker in 2007.

Hildenbrand said he'd been thinking about going into "government affairs" for the past couple years and had a few organizations approach him in 2018. "I basically told them I'm glad to know that they're interested in me, and obviously it's a space that I want to get into after I'm done," he said, "but I can't have any formal conversations while I'm in the Legislature."

'So what do you do?'

Former House Minority Leader Tim Greimel, D-Auburn Hills, was recently tapped as the new legislative director for AFSCME Council 25 and is still exploring whether he will have to register as what he called "the L-word."

Because he is a dues-paying member of the union, Greimel [may be exempt from the legal definition](#) and is asking the Secretary of State's Office for a declaratory ruling.

Greimel co-sponsored cooling-off legislation as recently as 2017 and said he still believes "we need a lot of broader government reforms in Michigan, from additional transparency laws to anti-conflict-of-interest laws."

A primary purpose of the bill he backed was to ensure lawmakers weren't promised lobbying gigs while still in office, Greimel said, adding that he did not have any job discussions with AFSCME Council 25 until he was out of office, when union President Lawrence Roehrig personally called him Jan. 4.

Former Sen. Goeff Hansen, R-Hart, registered as a lobbyist in his new role as a consultant for the city of Muskegon. He didn't recall co-sponsoring cooling-off legislation in 2007 but said he intentionally waited to discuss job offers until late last year "because I didn't think it was right to start looking for work before the end of my term."

While he doesn't expect to do much direct lobbying of lawmakers, Hansen said doing consulting work for Muskegon's city government is an obvious fit because of the relationship he developed with the city he represented in the Senate.

"I guess I look at it as 14 years of education on the things that I can help with," Hansen said of his time in the Michigan Legislature. Term limits force some lawmakers out of office at the prime of their career, he said, calling Hildenbrand a "young guy" who has to take care of his family.

"It's what his background is, so what do you do? Say no, you got to go bag groceries or something?"

Former Rep. Robert Kosowski, D-Westland, was recently hired as a lobbyist for the Michigan Association of Counties, Kosowski said he had no qualms about joining a "great group ... working on a lot of great things for Michigan." Former Sen. David Knezek, a Dearborn Heights Democrat who lost in last year's primary election, got a job this month as new Attorney General Dana Nessel's lobbyist to the Legislature.

They'll join other former state lawmakers currently registered as lobbyists, including former Sen. Tupac Hunter of Detroit and former Rep. Mike Callton of Nashville, who helped pass major medical marijuana reforms and now works as an industry consultant. Ex-Sen. Virgil Smith, who resigned in 2016 after he was sentenced to jail for shooting his ex-wife's car, also recently registered as a lobbyist for his own consulting firm.

Michigan has historically had a relatively high number of "revolvers" between the Legislature and lobbying corps, along with a relatively high number of interest groups, according a Strickland research paper recently accepted for publication in the Journal of Political Science. The high numbers are related.

At the congressional level, research shows that "the more staffers you have and more former members of Congress you have on your side" as a lobby firm, "the more often you tend to win," Strickland said.

Cooling off laws can delay but may not ultimately stop former legislators from becoming lobbyists, he said. Strickland's research found that lobbying moratoriums did not stop the revolving door to any "discernible degree" in states that implemented them between 1989 and 2011.

[Pam Bondi headed to Washington to work with lobbying firm](#)

Former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi is heading to Washington to take a new post with a leading lobbying firm.

Ballard Partners announced Tuesday the well-known Republican politician will head the firm's new regulatory compliance office. The firm is headed by Brian Ballard, who has close ties to President Donald Trump.

The news was first reported by [Politico](#).

Bondi left office earlier this month after serving two terms as attorney general.

Last November, President Trump said he wanted Bondi [to join his administration](#). During her time as office Bondi was a [frequent guest on Fox News](#), which stoked speculation she may start a television career.

Ballard Partners says Bondi will assist large companies implement policies dealing with various issues such as data privacy and opioid abuse.