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Weekly Lobbying Articles

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News Journal

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GOP leaders made trip with lobbyists, Ohio speaker who quit

<http://www.wnewsj.com/news/69480/gop-leaders-made-trip-with-lobbyists-ohio-speaker-who-quit>

Republican legislative leaders from at least four states have acknowledged taking part in a London summer trip with lobbyists and an Ohio speaker who recently resigned citing questioning by federal investigators about his activities.

Minnesota Speaker Kurt Daudt, Wisconsin Speaker Robin Vos, Michigan Speaker Tom Leonard and North Dakota House Majority Leader Al Carlson were at the four-day event with Republican Ohio Speaker Cliff Rosenberger last August, The Associated Press confirmed.

The event was sponsored and paid for by the GOPAC Education Fund's Institute for Leadership Development. GOPAC works to elect Republicans to higher office.

The politicians emphasized the money for the trip did not come from taxpayers, said they were not lobbied during the event and said they had complied with ethics laws in their states.

The powerful Rosenberger, who quit last week, had been criticized for his lavish lifestyle, including traveling around the world and staying in a luxury downtown Columbus condo owned by a wealthy Republican donor. He has said he believes his actions as speaker were "ethical and lawful."

Ohio's ethics laws, like those in most states, prohibit legislators from accepting valuable gifts but allow them to accept travel expenses to conferences related to official business if they aren't exchanged for legislative favors.

Rosenberger, who made about \$101,000 a year as a lawmaker, was allowed to pay for work-related trips through his own campaign fund, through House Republicans' political fund or through a stipend from an outside group such as GOPAC.

GOPAC, like many other groups that seek to inform state legislators, takes contributions from corporations to help fund its budget. An Ohio lobbyist who attended the London trip told the AP that corporations pay membership fees to the group that make them privy to invitations to events at which lawmakers will be present.

Among corporations attending the London event were Altria, Comcast, Walmart and Select Management, operator of the title lending business LoanMax, which has lobbying interests in Ohio, Wisconsin and several other states.

GOPAC Executive Director Jessica Curtis confirmed that Rosenberger and an Ohio state representative were among event guests. An Ohio-based lobbyist for LoanMax, Steve Dimon, also was on the trip. Title and payday lenders have been lobbying against proposed legislation that would place restrictions on their industry.

Dimon said he saw Rosenberger on the trip but declined to comment on whether they discussed any legislation or whether he has since been questioned by the FBI.

The FBI has said it will neither confirm nor deny there's an investigation into Rosenberger.

Carlson said he attended the trip with money from GOPAC and from his own pocket and he was unaware at the time of Rosenberger's resignation announcement of any investigation.

"It was paid for by GOPAC. It wasn't taxpayer money," Carlson said. "It was my time and my dime."

Vos and Rosenberger, friends who had appeared together at events, showed up together in photos from the London trip, along with lobbyists from their states.

Vos said he had not been contacted by the FBI or other authorities or discussed any legislation with lobbyists on the trip or since. He said Tuesday he supported looser regulation of title lenders because they serve people with no other access to credit.

"They serve a portion of the marketplace, which is why I believe they should operate with reasonable regulations," Vos said.

Vos' Republican caucus had considered making changes this session to rules for rent-to-own stores, but he said it did not consider any changes for title lending.

Daudt's office said his trip was paid for by GOPAC. It said he had not been contacted by the FBI about the trip or about Rosenberger.

Leonard's office confirmed Leonard was in attendance but said he was not lobbied on the trip.

Leonard's spokesman Gideon D'Assandro said Leonard is on the legislative leaders advisory board to GOPAC, which organized the event as an educational opportunity ahead of Britain's impending exit from the European Union. He said lawmakers and lobbyists who attended met with members of Parliament to talk about best practices and with trade officials to discuss the impacts of Brexit and opportunities for international trade.

The State
April 17, 2018

Utility trying to buy SCANA draws fire for its influence, environmental record

<http://www.thestate.com/latest-news/article208993219.html>

Dominion Energy, the utility giant looking to buy Cayce-based SCANA, garners a lot of respect from political leaders in its home state of Virginia, where it supplies power.

But the utility also faces criticism from public interest groups in Virginia over its rates, environmental protection record and connections to lawmakers in that state.

In recent years, Dominion has been embroiled in disputes ranging from whether it will clean up coal ash ponds to the powers that state regulators have over utility charges. The utility also continues to take heat for its plan to build a huge natural gas pipeline across parts of three states that some say is an unnecessary intrusion on rural communities.

Glen Besa, a former Sierra Club director in Virginia, said S.C. politicians should scrutinize Dominion carefully before they endorse its proposed acquisition of SCANA.

A longtime Dominion critic, Besa will be in Columbia for a news conference Tuesday that activists say is intended to "educate" the public about Dominion. He was invited by the S.C. Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth, two of SCANA's harshest critics and skeptics about the proposed Dominion. He was invited by the S.C. Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth, two of SCANA's harshest critics and skeptics about the proposed Dominion takeover.

"The bottom line is: You can't believe what they say on its face," Besa said of Dominion. "It is critically important for your legislators to execute extreme due diligence in understanding the nature of any deal."

Dominion bristles at Besa's criticisms, saying he is an out-of-the-loop activist whose complaints aren't valid.

"Glen Besa is retired and isn't up on the latest about what has been going on with Dominion Energy," the utility said in an email Monday. "He is a long-time ax-grinder that looks for every opportunity to raise money for the Sierra Club while kicking Dominion Energy."

Dominion's proposed takeover of SCANA is a result of the S.C. utility's failed decadelong effort to build two new nuclear reactors in Fairfield County. To compensate for the failed V.C. Summer nuclear reactor expansion project, Dominion, one of the country's largest utilities, has offered to give customers of SCE&G, SCANA's power-producing electric subsidiary, \$1,000 refunds and lower utility rates — if its SCANA takeover is approved.

The S.C. Legislature is considering bills that could cause Dominion to withdraw its SCANA buyout offer.

Dominion said Monday it has had support from some environmental groups, including the League of Conservation Voters, on legislation that was good for the public.

But Besa and others say there is plenty of cause to have questions about Dominion. They say:

- The utility helped persuade the Virginia legislature to approve a 2016 bill that limited the ability of that state's utility commission to order refunds to customers who, critics say, had been overcharged. Dominion counters that it didn't overcharge anyone.
- The utility has failed to dig up and remove toxic coal ash from waste pits at coal-fired power plants. In contrast, SCANA subsidiary SCE&G has agreed to remove coal ash from all of its waste pits to keep industrial toxins from seeping into the groundwater.

Dominion says it is among the nation's leaders in coal-ash cleanup. The utility says six of its 11 ash ponds will be cleaned and closed by the end of the year.'

However, officials with the Southern Environmental Law Center, who are not part of Tuesday's news conference in Columbia, said Dominion has been reluctant to clean up coal ash that it dumped into unlined pits in Virginia.

Law center attorneys Nate Benforado and Frank Holleman say Dominion only is planning to cap certain waste ponds, not dig up the ash and remove it. The law center has sued to force a cleanup in Virginia. Benforado and Holleman said Dominion lags other Southeastern utilities in cleaning up coalash pollution.

"We pay a lot of attention to what is going on in the Southeast, and while we're seeing progress in South Carolina, Georgia and North Carolina, we have not seen any such progress in Virginia," Benforado said.

Dominion, which supplies power to more than 2 million customers in Virginia and North Carolina, also remains under the gun for its decision to run a natural gas pipeline from West Virginia to southeastern North Carolina, near the S.C. border. A utility executive has said Dominion is interested in extending the pipeline into South Carolina.

Critics say the pipeline will disrupt communities, cause water pollution and increase natural gas use when it is not needed.

The company disputes that, saying the pipeline is needed to provide energy.

Dominion said many of the environmentalists' criticisms either are distorted or invalid.

The company said the bill that critics say tied the hands of regulators to order refunds actually froze in place utility rates that were 15 percent below the national average. Critics say those rates were higher than they should have been and the rate freeze guaranteed profits to the utility. But Dominion disputes the characterization that it overcharged customers.

What is unquestioned is that Dominion is a major contributor to the campaigns of Virginia legislators.

In one instance, the company donated \$700,000 to three key legislators from 2003 through 2017, the Associated Press reported. Those lawmakers, a Democrat and two Republicans, have sponsored company-backed, industry-friendly legislation that Dominion wanted approved, according to the AP.

The utility, its executives and lobbyists handed out about \$1 million in campaign contributions last year, the AP reported in January. The Richmond Times Dispatch reported similar findings.

Dominion discounts questions about its political clout in Virginia.

"Lawmakers don't make policy decisions based on campaign contributions, and would find it insulting to suggest that," Dominion's statement said. "Contributions come from the employee-led (political action committee) a grassroots organization committed to good public policy."

Business Insider
April 15, 2018

Trump is turning a blind eye to a much bigger trend with Amazon

<http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-amazon-take-over-washington-dc-2018-4>

As President Donald Trump attacks Amazon over sales tax collection, its deal with the US Post Office, and for CEO Jeff Bezos' ownership of The Washington Post, the company looks poised to become the biggest player in Washington, DC, outside of the federal government.

Consider:

- Signs have increasingly pointed to Amazon locating its much-hyped and sought-after second headquarters in the Washington, DC, metro area — a project that could bring with it some roughly 50,000 new jobs.
- The company is competing for a bevy of lucrative government contracts, including a deal worth billions with the Pentagon to provide the military with cloud computing services. A source told Business Insider earlier this month, they "can't imagine any possible way that the deal could be stopped" between Amazon and the Pentagon.
- The company already has a contract for \$600 million to provide similar services to the Central Intelligence Agency.
- Amazon employs one of the largest lobbying staffs in the city, and its lobbying efforts are growing. Amazon spent \$15.4 million on lobbying in 2017, up more than \$3 million from the prior year, Reuters reported.

"Up until now, Washington, DC, has largely been a company town of one. The US government," Terry Sullivan, campaign manager for Republican Sen. Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential bid, told Business Insider. "Amazon appears poised to dramatically change that dynamic."

Aside from his frequent attacks linking Bezos and The Post, which has no direct relationship with Amazon, Trump has barely touched on any of these Amazon developments. He has yet to make any

comment about the company's extensive HQ2 process, and he has only publicly discussed Amazon's lobbying efforts in terms of The Post, falsely claiming the publication is a vehicle for Amazon lobbying.

Oracle co-CEO Safra Catz, whose company is in direct competition with Amazon for the massive Pentagon contract, did bring it up at a recent dinner with the president. Catz complained to Trump that the bidding process was designed so that Amazon could win the bid, but Trump did not give any indication that he would put his thumb on the scale.

Where Trump has focused

Trump has instead zeroed in on sales tax collection and the company's deal with the US Postal Service. Both of his attacks are misleading.

For instance, on the sales tax issue, Amazon recently moved to collect sales taxes on its inventory in the 45 states that have such taxes as well as Washington, DC. The Trump Organization's online retailer, Trumpstore.com, collects sales tax in just a couple of states. Online retailers are obliged to collect the taxes only in states where they have a physical presence.

Trump's most concentrated attacks are, predictably, on the connection between The Post and Amazon via their mutual owner, Bezos.

He has falsely accused The Post of being a "lobbyist weapon" for the company, seeking to keep politicians "from looking into Amazon no-tax monopoly." He baselessly called the publication a "big tax shelter" for Amazon, the stock of which he said would "crumble like a paper bag" if the company "ever had to pay fair taxes." And he attempted to brand the paper as the "#AmazonWashingtonPost."

The Post has pushed back on any assertion that Bezos has influenced coverage, or that Amazon is paying its bills.

Trump's attacks on the connection between The Post and Amazon often happen when the publication publishes critical articles on him.

"There isn't anybody here who is paid by Amazon," Martin Baron, the publication's executive editor, told The New York Times. "Not one penny."

Baron said Bezos has "never suggested a story to anybody here."

Kurt Bardella, a former spokesperson for Breitbart News and Republican Rep. Darrell Issa of California, told Business Insider that Trump's "targeting of Jeff Bezos, Amazon and the Washington Post clearly stems from petty jealousy," not from concerns about Amazon's continually growing stature — including right in the president's backyard.

"Trump has created a fictitious conspiracy in his mind where Jeff Bezos is the reason why the Post scrutinizes the Trump Administration," Bardella, who is no longer a Republican, said. "Trump also views Bezos as a rival in both wealth and stature. He desperately craves the acceptance and stature that Bezos is the beneficiary of."

Bardella said that "unlike Trump," Bezos won't be "derailed" by "a public tantrum on Twitter."

"Putting HQ2 in the DC, Maryland and Virginia region will give Bezos a game-changing presence in Washington that will outlast the Donald Trump presidency," he said. "At a time when the Trump Administration is unraveling before our very eyes absorbing resignations and terminations, Bezos is essentially creating his own economy within Washington that will allow him to out-maneuver and outlast Trump."

'Amazon must be very careful and walk a tightrope'

Lawmakers have put Amazon under the microscope as Trump has lashed out.

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, told CNN earlier this month that Amazon has gotten too big and that Congress needs to take action. Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican, tweeted that potential "'new economy' monopolies will require close monitoring," pointing to Amazon.

One Republican lobbyist told Business Insider that the sense is that Capitol Hill lawmakers will move on to scrutinizing Amazon and Google following Facebook, whose CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified to both the House and Senate this week.

"I would be shocked if Congress didn't do something on tech this year," the lobbyist said.

Others have put Amazon's lobbying and political donations under the microscope.

The company's PAC actually gave a majority of its 2016 donations to Republicans. But some on the right view Amazon as having a liberal bend. Certainly, Trump has made such connections regarding Bezos, Amazon, and The Post.

"I think the lesson for all of the tech companies is that having a corporate political viewpoint is not conducive to generating shareholder value," Barry Bennett, an adviser to Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, told Business Insider. "When companies like Google and their executives invested millions in Hillary, they made friends and enemies. Amazon must be very careful and walk a tightrope."

The Detroit News
April 13, 2018

Mich. Speaker 'not lobbied' pm trip with lobbyists

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2018/04/13/michigan-speaker-free-trip-lobbyists/33808327/>

Michigan House Speaker Tom Leonard was among a group of Republican lawmakers who rubbed elbows with lending lobbyists last year on a free trip to London that may have contributed to the recent resignation of a top Ohio official.

But Leonard was not personally lobbied during the four-day trip, which was paid for by the GOPAC political training organization and billed as an educational excursion, the speaker's spokesman said Friday.

"He met everybody on the trip, but he did not talk business with them either before, during or after the trip," said Gideon D'Assandro. "He doesn't personally know any of the lobbyists from the payday lending companies."

Ohio House Speaker Cliff Rosenberg announced his resignation Tuesday amid a Federal Bureau of Investigation probe and reports of questionable lobbyist relationships and extensive travel, including trips to England, France and Israel.

No one from the FBI or other law enforcement agencies have contacted Leonard about the London trip, according to the Michigan speaker's office, and the free travel does not appear to violate state lobbying or disclosure rules.

The late August trip was paid for by the GOPAC Education Fund, a 501(c)4 nonprofit. Legislative leaders from around the United States met with British government officials, visited Parliament, discussed trade

opportunities and studied former British prime ministers Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, D'Assandro said.

The trip included an opportunity for lobbyists to mingle with lawmakers, according to the Cincinnati Enquirer. Steve Dimon of Ohio and Leslie Gaines of South Carolina, two lobbyists for title lender LoanMax, are pictured in Facebook photos of the trip.

Gaines posted one photo that showed Leonard and other lawmakers posing for the camera.

Leonard "must've met" the lobbyists, D'Assandro acknowledged, "but he did not talk business." Asked if the speaker talked to any other lobbyists in London, D'Assandro reiterated that Leonard "was not lobbied on the trip."

GOPAC is focused on "educating and electing a new generation of Republican leaders," according to its website. The conservative group recently named Rep. Mary Whiteford, R-Casco Township, as one of its "emerging leaders" for 2018.

Leonard, who is seeking the GOP nomination for Michigan attorney general, sits on GOPAC's legislative advisory board and is a "a valued member," Executive Director Jessica Curtis said in a Friday email. She confirmed Leonard participated in the Institute for Leadership Development program in London.

Six U.S. legislative leaders were invited to hear talks from members of Parliament as well as U.S.-British trade specialists and experts on deceased British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Curtis said.

When asked how many lobbyists were on the trip and what their role in the educational event was, Curtis didn't give a direct response. She said, "The names of the contributors to the GOPAC Education Fund are not publicly reported, which is in accordance with the IRS regulations for 501(c)4 organizations."

Title and payday lenders have been fighting potential new regulations in Ohio, according to the Enquirer. Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, also on the trip, has reportedly sponsored measures to loosen payday and title loan regulation in that state.

The Michigan House is not considering any significant title or payday lending legislation, and Leonard "has not actually worked on payday lending issues this term," D'Assandro said.

But a three-bill state Senate package introduced last year would rewrite payday lending regulations in Michigan. The Dykema firm in Lansing is lobbying for the package on behalf of a lending company called Axxess Financial. A second lender, Advance America, has lobbied in the House, but no bills this year have materialized in the lower chamber.

The Loan Max lobbyists, Dimon and Gaines, are not registered in Michigan, but parent company Select Management Resources is represented by the multi-client Governmental Consultant Services Inc. The Detroit News reported that Select Management Resources pushed a controversial auto-title lending bill in late 2014, but it's not clear whether the company is currently advocating for any legislation in Michigan.

Michigan does not require groups such as GOPAC that do not directly lobby lawmakers to disclose free trips they provide, said Craig Mauger, a watchdog with the Michigan Campaign Finance Network.

“The lobbying law covers lobbying, so if (Leonard) says he wasn’t lobbied and the group says it was an educational trip, it doesn’t fall under lobbying rules, which means he could take that trip and not disclose it anywhere,” Mauger said.

Michigan lawmakers “often” take unreported paid trips, Mauger said, noting that lobbyists did not report a single expense for the entire second half of 2017.

Michigan law requires lobbyists to disclose lawmaker travel expenses only if the bill tops \$800 — the threshold was \$775 in 2017 but is adjusted annually for inflation. In Ohio, lobbyists must report travel or any other expense topping \$25.

The GOPAC Education Fund is not required to disclose donors, but GOPAC also operates a separate political organization that is required to file disclosure reports as it claims nonprofit status under Section 527 of the Internal Revenue Code.

Reports filed with the Internal Revenue Service show the GOPAC 527 received more than \$930,000 in contributions from individuals and corporations during the second half of 2017, including an \$80,000 contribution from Select Management Resources, the Loan Max parent company. From Michigan, Amerisure Insurance of Farmington Hills and Jackson National of Lansing each gave \$10,000.

“The idea that lawmakers can accept free travel from groups that are... trying to influence politics in some way and never have to disclose that to the public should be concerning to people,” Mauger said. “There are so many get-arounds in our lobbyist disclosure rules that it’s sometimes amazing that anything gets reported.”

Leader-Telegram

April 14, 2018

Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Vos defends free trip to London with lobbyists

<http://www.leadertelegram.com/News/Daily-Updates/2018/04/14/Assembly-speaker-defends-free-trip-to-London-with-lobbyists-1.html>

Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Robin Vos is defending his free trip to London with lobbyists, travel said to have contributed to the resignation of his counterpart and close friend in Ohio.

Vos was among a group of lawmakers from several states who participated in the trip last August. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported Friday that Vos said he followed ethics laws in accepting it.

Wisconsin ethics laws generally prohibit legislators from accepting valuable gifts but do allow them to accept travel expenses to go to conferences about official business.

The speaker of the Ohio House, Cliff Rosenberger, said this week he was stepping down amid an investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation that is reportedly looking at the four-day trip to England and other issues.

Vos said Friday that he had not been contacted by the FBI or other authorities or discussed any legislation with lobbyists on the trip, either during it or afterward.

Vos told the Journal Sentinel in an interview that he supported looser regulation of title lenders because they played a role serving people with no other access to credit.

“I had never met the people who operate LoanMax and I still haven’t,” Vos said of Select Management’s title lending business. “But I do think they have a right to operate.”

LoanMax has 16 locations around Wisconsin, according to its website. Select Management spent \$96,000 on lobbying in Wisconsin last year, according to the state Ethics Commission.

Vos said his Republican caucus had considered making changes this session to rules for rent-to-own stores but not for title lending.

Over the past decade, Wisconsin Republicans have received \$88,000 in campaign donations from the leader of a title loan company that paid for the trip. Campaign finance records show the donations from Select Management Resources chief executive officer Rod Aycox, his wife and other family in Georgia.

Vos had been one of several Republicans considering a run for the Wisconsin seat held by U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan, but announced Friday morning he would not run.

NBC News
April 13, 2018

Zuckerberg’s testimony raises new questions about Facebook’s lobbying practices

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/zuckerberg-s-testimony-raises-new-questions-facebook-s-lobbying-practices-n865726>

In February, Facebook gave \$200,000 to The Committee to Protect California Jobs, a business-backed political action group dedicated to defeating a state ballot initiative that would expand Californians’ privacy controls.

Then on Wednesday, after Mark Zuckerberg’s two-day grilling by 44 members of Congress — in which he spoke positively about the prospect of regulation — Facebook withdrew its support from the group. Facebook told local San Francisco television station KPIX: “We took this step in order to focus our efforts on supporting reasonable privacy measures in California.”

Just what “reasonable privacy measures” might mean to Facebook remains to be seen, but the company’s state-based lobbying efforts are the subject of fresh scrutiny following Zuckerberg’s testimony.

Mary Stone Ross, president of Californians for Consumer Privacy, the group behind the ballot initiative, said Facebook’s move is a positive step but that the company will need to do more to show that it’s truly changed its ways.

“We are really grateful that they pulled out of this initiative, but clearly it’s not enough,” Ross said. “If he’s out there testifying that they truly care about users’ privacy and safeguarding their personal information, then words are not enough.”

Facebook was one of five tech giants in the California campaign finance committee, joining Google, Verizon, AT&T, and Comcast in donating a combined \$1 million to fight the ballot measure on the grounds that the legislation was flawed and would cause tech businesses to flee the state. (Comcast owns NBCUniversal, the parent company of NBC News.)

Of the decision to pull out of the California group, a representative for Facebook told NBC News: “We have no further information to offer at this time.” The representative declined to shed light on whether Facebook was currently involved in any other efforts to oppose privacy legislation in California or any other state.

Facebook has been at the center of a firestorm surrounding how it handles its users’ data after the country learned that the personal information of an estimated 87 million American users was improperly harvested by a researcher and then used by Cambridge Analytica, a data analysis firm hired by President Donald Trump’s election campaign. Following the revelations, Zuckerberg and his representatives have gone on an apology tour with the promise to “do better.”

In recent days, Facebook has made a number of privacy-strengthening changes to its social network including limiting the data that can be gathered by apps that people connect to their Facebook profiles. The company also discontinued features that were vulnerable to abuse, like the ability to search for profiles by phone numbers. It also announced that it would adopt the recommendations of the Honest Ads Act, which seeks to regulate online political advertising.

Facebook’s support for user privacy, however only goes so far, particularly when it comes to government regulation. Facebook has responded to the prospect of federal regulation this year the old fashioned way: with money. In addition to its in-house team of lobbyists, Facebook spent more money on outside lobbying this year than it ever had before: \$11.5 million on 11 different lobbying firms in 2017, according to disclosure filings analyzed by the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

Facebook spent 2.4 million euros last year on lobbying the European Union, doubling its 2016 expenditures in the region where sweeping online privacy reforms dictated by the General Data Protection Regulation are about to take effect.

At the U.S. state and local levels, Facebook’s activity and influence is less clear. It spent \$404,200 on state lobbying in 2017 and \$838,460 in 2016, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics. But as the Center for Public Integrity has reported, Facebook prefers to influence state laws through trade associations.

In at least one state, the social media giant has a definite interest, and a possible connection, to what privacy advocates are calling a move to “gut” an online privacy law.

An Illinois law restricting the use of data from facial, iris, voice and fingerprint scans — a law known for being the first and strictest biometrics legislation in the nation — is currently under threat by a new bill currently that would grant exceptions to allow employers and retail stores to utilize the technology.

As reported in the Verge, the bill threatening to weaken the 2008 Biometric Information Privacy Act is being co-sponsored by four lawmakers, each of whom have received campaign donations from Facebook in the last six months. Additionally, its being backed by the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, which has a technology council co-chaired by Dan Sachs, a Facebook lobbyist.

In a statement to the Verge, a Facebook spokesperson denied having any involvement in the bill.

“We have not taken any position on the proposed legislation in Illinois,” the spokesperson said, “nor have we suggested language or spoken to any legislators about it.”

Senator Richard Durbin, D-Ill., brought up the legislation and Facebook’s influence during the Senate hearing on Tuesday.

“I’m afraid Facebook has come down to the position of trying to carve out exceptions to that,” Durbin said, referring to the Illinois bill. “I hope you’ll fill me in on how that is consistent with protecting privacy.”

Zuckerberg never answered, as Durbin’s time had run out.

Roll Call April 13, 2018

Former Coal Lobbyist Confirmed as Pruitt’s Deputy at EPA

<https://www.rollcall.com/news/politics/former-coal-lobbyist-confirmed-epa>

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt now has a deputy — a former fossil fuel lobbyist — after a Senate confirmation vote Thursday.

The Senate has confirmed former fossil fuel lobbyist Andrew Wheeler as deputy EPA administrator, providing a second-in-command for Administrator Scott Pruitt as he struggles amid alleged ethical failings.

Wheeler was confirmed Thursday with a 53-45 vote. Some Democrats hoped Pruitt’s difficulties would give them the votes to block the confirmation, but their efforts were not enough. Democratic Sens. Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and Joe Manchin III of West Virginia joined Republicans in voting for Wheeler. Both are running for re-election this year in states won by President Donald Trump.

“Every West Virginian wants clean air and clean water and I intend to be vigilant in working with the Environmental Protection Agency to ensure that our fundamental environmental protections are implemented in a sound, fair and effective way,” Manchin said after the vote. “I believe that the economy and the environment can and must be balanced. After meeting with Andrew Wheeler, I believe that he will work with states like West Virginia, not against us.”

Wheeler, who has previously worked for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, including under former Chairman James M. Inhofe, R-Okla., had an easier process during confirmation hearings before lawmakers familiar with him.

Democrats raised concerns that his ties to the fossil fuel industry could influence his actions at the agency, which they criticize for undoing environmental protections and for lacking transparency under Pruitt. But many acknowledged they knew him from his time with the committee and that they could work with him at EPA.

Asked during his Nov. 8 confirmation hearing whether he would recuse himself from cases involving his former clients, Wheeler first hesitated before conceding.

"I will be recusing myself on any matters where there is a conflict going forward," Wheeler said.

The stakes for his confirmation rose in recent days as more ethical allegations against his new boss mounted, including lavish spending on flights, expensive hotels and office renovations, and retaliatory actions towards staff who challenged that spending.

'Dangerous Duo'

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., said on the floor before the vote that Pruitt and Wheeler would be a "dangerous duo" given the latter's previous work on behalf of coal companies. Wheeler has lobbied on behalf of coal firms such as Murray Energy, one of the nation's largest, and has led consulting firm Faegre Baker Daniels' energy practice. He is also vice president of the Washington Coal Club.

Environment and Public Works top Democrat Thomas R. Carper of Delaware spoke in opposition to Wheeler's confirmation on the Senate floor, saying his nomination was "emblematic of an ethically tone-deaf administration," and that it was important to consider how Wheeler will address Pruitt's ethical lapses "because it has become clear that my Republican colleagues will not do so."

"We should be able to hear from Andrew Wheeler what his plans are to rein in the abuses at the EPA before he takes this important job," Carper said.

Republicans have maintained that Wheeler is the right person to help Pruitt continue undoing the "punishing" regulations of the Obama administration and to tame what they call a runaway agency.

"His wealth of experience at the EPA, on Capitol Hill, and in the private sector have prepared him for this leadership position," Environment and Public Works Chairman John Barrasso, R-Wyo., said after the confirmation. "Now that the Senate has confirmed Mr. Wheeler, he can get to work advancing policies to protect America's air, land, water, and communities."

The position of the deputy EPA administrator had been occupied by an Obama administration holdover, Mike Flynn, in an acting role until April 3 when he retired.

"Andrew Wheeler has spent his entire career advancing sound environmental policies and I look forward to him bringing his expertise and leadership to the agency," Pruitt said in a news release following Wheeler's confirmation. "I look forward working with Andrew to implement President Trump's environmental agenda."

Albuquerque Journal
April 12, 2018

Poll shows NM voters want campaign finance reform

<https://www.abqjournal.com/1157738/poll-shows-nm-voters-want-campaign-finance-reform.html>

With thousands of young people on the march, women activated by the “#Me Too” movement, and a new crop of candidates for state elections, this year’s elections could be an indication of our state’s appetite for reforming a system that my organization, Common Cause New Mexico, has often found wanting.

Common Cause is a non-partisan organization that does not endorse candidates, but like all ordinary citizens, we have a vested interest in a functioning democratic system which represents the voices of everyday people. We’ve been focused on controlling the influence of big money and special interests on elections and the decision-making process, guaranteeing access for qualified voters, and holding our representatives to high ethical standards. We think it’s what democracy looks like.

This year we asked some different questions in our annual poll and found a few reasons to be optimistic.

First, the poll, taken by Research and Polling Inc. in January, found that only 24 percent of the 452 voters sampled felt New Mexico was on the right track, a much higher level of discontent than in the 2014 elections. It also showed an appetite for reforms never before taken seriously – things like paying legislators, which 54 percent support, and lengthening the legislative sessions, which 65 percent want to do. And along with the usual high level of support for things like transparency for PAC, lobbyist and campaign activities, there was something new – 60 percent of respondents said that they would be more likely to support candidates who push for campaign reforms like these.

That gives us reason to hope. Campaign finance has never been a flashy issue. It’s rarely mentioned in debates. But we think it’s foundational to a functioning democracy. Everyone deserves to have their own voice heard in decisions affecting their families, and to also know who is behind the curtain affecting the outcome.

With these poll results, we now think the public is listening, too.

This month we’re shouting our priorities from the rooftops, and circulating our pro-democracy agenda to candidates and political organizations of all stripes. According to polling data – our own and others’ – many of these issues have had the overwhelming support of voters for years, but they always have great difficulty crossing the finishing line.

Here’s a sampling of what we think a pro-democracy agenda looks like:

- Online and automatic voter registration to allow people to vote easily.
- Open primaries to allow decline-to-state and independent voters to participate in primaries.
- An independent, non-partisan ethics commission to make sure elected officials, lobbyists and contractors play by the rules.
- Maintenance of state campaign contribution limits to stem the tide of big money in state elections.

- Disclosure of all political contributions and expenditures from lobbyists, PACs and candidates, in accordance with the constitution.
- Citizen-funded elections using small-donor public financing, which matches small citizen contributions with public funds to enable ordinary people to participate meaningfully and curb special interests and wealthy donors.
- Complete disclosure of activities, contributions and expenditures of lobbyists aimed at influencing the policy-making process.
- A two-year waiting period before lawmakers can become lobbyists.
- An independent, non-partisan redistricting commission to ensure competitive, fair elections where every vote counts equally and the outcome is not rigged by maps drawn to maximize partisan or incumbent advantage.

Voters need to know whether candidates running for office in New Mexico support these common-sense measures. At Common Cause New Mexico, we consider them buttresses to strengthen the pillars of our democracy – fair and equal representation of qualified voters, honest and accountable public officials, and a transparent government. The only way to find out is to ask them at the next candidate forum, fundraiser or community event.

Complete results of Common Cause New Mexico's 2018 poll can be found at <http://www.commoncause.org/states/new-mexico/research-and-reports/2018-polling.pdf>