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Lobbyist behind Genting's monorail bid helped mayor block South Dade Metrorail plan

A year before he partnered with the Genting casino developer to pitch the county on a monorail to Miami Beach, lobbyist Ralph Garcia-Toledo played an insider role in helping Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez defeat [a \\$1.3 billion Metrorail extension to South Dade](#).

Garcia-Toledo, chairman of Gimenez's [campaign-donor operation in 2016](#), accompanied the mayor and county transit chief Alice Bravo in five private meetings with elected officials, according to Bravo's office and Garcia-Toledo. The officials held seats on a Miami-Dade transportation board that was deciding between a rail expansion that county consultants said wasn't financially viable and the administration's proposal for a \$243 million system of modernized rapid-transit buses that would leave money to build transit projects elsewhere.

"He told me he felt strongly about the buses, which happened to coincide with my opinion," Gimenez said of Garcia-Toledo, a regular donor in county races and finance chairman for the mayor's reelection campaign. "He has influence over commissioners."

Garcia-Toledo's seat at the table for Gimenez's push for the county's first rapid-transit bus system highlights the connections he brings to Genting's push for the county's first modern monorail system.

On Wednesday, county commissioners are scheduled to vote on Gimenez's recommendation to accept Genting's proposal to launch an accelerated bidding contest to build a transit system between downtown Miami and Miami Beach. The Beach and South Dade routes are two of the six corridors identified in the county's 2016 Strategic Miami Area Rapid Transit study effort — best known as the SMART Plan.

Garcia-Toledo is the president of Aqualand Development Ltd. Co., a company listed alongside Genting and Chinese electric-vehicle maker BYD as members of the "Miami Beach Monorail Consortium." The vice president of Aqualand is Jesse Manzano-Plaza, a longtime Genting lobbyist and Gimenez's 2016 campaign manager. Garcia-Toledo is registered to lobby for his own firm, G-T Construction, but not for Genting or any other company.

On May 2, the consortium submitted a confidential proposal to the Gimenez administration to build a monorail between Miami Beach and downtown Miami, where Genting wants to open a casino along the proposed transit route.

The details remain secret under county and state law governing proposals designated as "unsolicited" by a local government. Under those rules, accepting an unsolicited proposal triggers a procurement process allowing other bidders to try and beat the original offer. The

county does not have to accept any of the bids; it can choose not to build the project or start the bidding process again.

Garcia-Toledo said his work helping Gimenez win support for the administration's SMART initiative for South Dade in July 2018 did not present a conflict for his later role as a proposer for a rail project on the Beach SMART corridor.

"That is ridiculous," Garcia-Toledo said in a written response to the conflict question. He pointed out that the county's consultant for the South Dade corridor, AECOM, concluded last year that rapid-transit buses were the most viable option for South Dade. The report said the suburban commuting route lacked the density that would make a 20-mile Metrorail extension competitive for federal transportation grants.

"I had no involvement in the technical decision outlined in the AECOM study," Garcia-Toledo said, and those conclusions led to Gimenez advocating for rapid-transit buses in South Dade.

Gimenez proposed South Dade's rapid-transit bus line as a waypoint toward rail, allowing the county to build the daily ridership needed to compete for hefty federal transportation grants. The South Dade vote represented one of the most politically charged transit votes since Gimenez became mayor in 2011. It asked county leaders to endorse an option other than the South Dade Metrorail extension pitched voters in the 2002 referendum that created a half-percent sales tax for transportation projects.

Ahead of the vote by the 25-member Transportation Planning Organization, Gimenez and Bravo had to head off an effort by some South Dade mayors and county representatives to insist Miami-Dade commit to building Metrorail before moving onto other SMART corridor votes.

Coral Gables commissioner Vince Lago, a member of the transportation board, met with Garcia-Toledo, Bravo and AECOM staffers working on the county's South Dade study. "Their argument was that this [bus plan] was the only financially viable option at their disposal ... that they wouldn't have money left over" after a vote to extend Metrorail.

The revelation that a political ally of Gimenez was a partner in a rail effort for a different SMART corridor has drawn harsh statements from South Dade's Metrorail advocates, who complained the county mayor refused to consider a smaller rail segment to ease cost concerns.

The "proposal to benefit a casino company, conveniently labeled 'unsolicited' to skirt the sunshine laws, with one partner your former campaign finance director ... is why our county cannot be trusted to make good use of the people's hard-earned tax money," former Cutler Bay mayor Peggy Bell said in a statement.

Garcia-Toledo works for Genting under a construction-management contract for the casino company's agreement with Miami-Dade to build a 300-room hotel above the county's bus depot and Omni Metromover station. Genting agreed to upgrade both, while [paying Miami-Dade millions in rent](#).

The Metromover station sits next to the 14-acre waterfront property that once housed the Miami Herald. Genting purchased it in 2011 for \$236 million in its bid to build the country's largest casino in Miami. That effort stalled in Tallahassee when lawmakers declined to expand the state's casino rules. The former Herald property sits along the proposed transit route to the

Beach — a project the county has been studying since the 1980s and which used to go by the shorthand “Baylink.”

Genting’s property could give it a unique advantage in the competition for a beach transit project, since it could provide real estate for a station Miami-Dade would otherwise have to purchase. Eileen Higgins, the Miami-Dade commissioner who represents the Beach side of the proposed route, met with Garcia-Toledo and Manzano-Plaza about two weeks before Genting submitted its monorail proposal. While Higgins said the future bid didn’t come up during the meeting about the Beach corridor, she said the Genting plan could be promising.

“This is a big property owner. In the beginning, I thought this was so unscrupulous. Then I said: Calm down,” Higgins said. “They may be able to provide a better solution. They own all the land that could be ideal” for a transit station.

The Genting proposal could prompt Miami-Dade to vote on a transit option for the Beach before a tax-funded consultant finishes its study of the SMART corridor. The Parsons engineering firm has narrowed the options to extending the existing Metromover system from Miami to the Beach, creating a new monorail or light-rail line, or building a rapid-transit bus line similar to what was approved in South Dade. The 2020 budget Gimenez plans to propose Tuesday states “the Beach Corridor consultant teams will complete preliminary engineering and environmental evaluation of the transit alternatives and recommend a preferred alternative” by the fall.

“I don’t know how much relevance the study will have,” Gimenez said. He pointed to county rules triggered when Miami-Dade accepts an unsolicited proposal, including a 120-day window for other bidders to submit competing proposals. “We have to follow certain parameters.”

Jennifer Moon, the deputy mayor appointed to oversee transit on July 1, said the administration doesn’t want to hold up a promising transit plan for the sake of the Parsons report. “If you’ve gotten a really good proposal that you want to pursue, and you want to have a competition based on that proposal, you don’t want to stop that to wait for the study to be finished,” she said.

Gimenez first revealed bare details about the Genting monorail plan last week with the July 3 release of a memo recommending the county accept the proposal. The release coincided with scheduling a July 10 vote by the County Commission on whether to launch the bidding process needed by Genting and partners to allow other bidders to compete with the still-secret plan. The seven-day gap between the proposal being revealed and facing its first vote prompted Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber to ask for a delay, saying the “accelerated timeline poses challenges.”

The scheduled monorail vote falls in the middle of a county trip to Asia to visit transit facilities, including a tour Thursday of BYD’s new “Skyrail” monorail in Shenzhen. Paid for by the Transportation Planning Organization, the trip’s delegation includes Bravo and board director Aileen Bouclé. “How do I get my questions answered when everybody is in Asia,” said Higgins, who declined requests to join the delegation. “They really wanted me to go.”

Genting has been laying the groundwork for its Beach corridor proposal for at least a year. Commission Chairwoman Audrey Edmonson, whose district includes the Miami side of the proposed monorail route, said last week that she met with Garcia-Toledo and Manzano-Plaza in China last year about the Beach corridor but declined to provide details, citing county confidentiality rules on Genting’s unsealed proposal. “I’m not breaking any laws,” she said.

Edmonson's meeting occurred on a two-week county trade mission to Asia in May 2018. Gimenez led the delegation, and the trip included tours of transit systems that might work in Miami, including inspecting an automated bus designed to resemble a train. Garcia-Toledo said he asked Genting to arrange a demonstration of the vehicle for the mayor and county officials in Zhouzhou. Garcia-Toledo and Manzano-Plaza were the only two private-sector executives on the visit of the government-owned CRRC facility, according to a list provided by Gimenez's office.

Days later, Gimenez said he met with Genting Chairman Lim Kok Thay on a Hong Kong cruise ship and discussed the Malaysian casino company's interest in a potential Baylink project.

On Monday, Gimenez said Garcia-Toledo's prior work supporting the mayor's reelection shouldn't disqualify him from pursuing county business, especially since county commissioners — not the mayor — make final decisions on the transit budget. Miami-Dade does not bar companies doing business with the county from making political donations, and most incumbents count on vendors, lobbyists and developers for the bulk of their donations.

"He's not a relative of mine, and he's not a business partner of mine. ... He was involved in my campaign. There were a whole bunch of people involved in my campaign," Gimenez said.

"There's a process. My people who are analyzing this understand that line. I see no conflict."

Garcia-Toledo is a longtime county contractor who runs a construction-management firm that has won subcontracts from successful bidders in Miami-Dade.

His firm, G-T Construction, could collect up to \$18 million from a 12-year county sewer contract, and was part of a team that in 2017 [won what's now a \\$22 million consulting contract](#) between engineering firm WSP and Miami-Dade transit. The assignment included the SMART study of the 11-mile western corridor along State Road 836. Gimenez said Monday that Garcia-Toledo also performed subcontractor work on the South corridor.

Bravo's office said Garcia-Toledo was in five meetings with the transit director and Transportation Planning Organization members last July, and Garcia-Toledo said the mayor led two of those private sessions. Members of AECOM's South corridor team attended some of the meetings, too.

Miami Gardens Mayor Oliver Gilbert, the current chairman of the Transportation Planning Organization, said he did not question Garcia-Toledo's role when he joined Bravo and Gimenez for a meeting in Gilbert's City Hall office on July 10, 2018, ahead of the bus-versus-rail vote. Garcia-Toledo is a supporter of Gilbert's, and gave \$5,000 earlier this year to Common Voices, the political committee helping the mayor's 2020 campaign for County Commission.

"I know Ralph. It wouldn't be a stranger" in my office, Gilbert said. "I generally don't ask people why they're there. ... I don't remember Ralph saying much at all. It was mostly the mayor and I talking transportation in general." On Tuesday, Gilbert added: "Ralph had an interest in transportation. He came with the mayor. He didn't say much.. I thought it was pretty unremarkable."

Gilbert missed the Aug. 30, 2018, vote authorizing Miami-Dade to pursue a rapid-transit bus system for South Dade. Lago voted against it. Three other board members on record as attending administration meetings with Garcia-Toledo — County Commissioner Jean Monestime, Hialeah Mayor Carlos Hernández and then-North Miami Mayor Smith Joseph — voted with the Gimenez administration in the 15-7 decision.

South Dade remains the only SMART corridor attached to an actual transit project. In June, Miami-Dade invited developers to bid on design and construction work for the 20-mile bus system, which is budgeted at \$304 million with a targeted completion in 2022. The project includes 14 iconic bus stations allowing for group boarding and advanced ticket sales, designed to speed buses equipped with bay doors to make quick stops along the express route that connects to the Dadeland South Metrorail station.

The Gimenez administration also received a proposal designated as unsolicited for the South Dade corridor, with British firm Ascendal Group submitting a confidential plan on April 29 for the rapid-transit bus system. It arrived ahead of Miami-Dade launching its bidding process for the bus system. Manzano-Plaza is a registered lobbyist for Ascendal, as is Albert Dotson Jr., who is representing the monorail group as well. Gimenez has until the end of July to recommend the county accept or reject that proposal.

Female tech lobbyists shake up industry

Male-dominated Silicon Valley has long faced criticism over gender diversity issues, but in Washington the tech industry's most prominent groups are increasingly led by women.

For women in the industry, those changes are a promising trend and long overdue — and come at a critical time for tech businesses.

Shirley Bloomfield, CEO of NTCA – The Rural Broadband Association, recalled an incident where members of a corporate board were urged to wear golf shirts for an annual photograph.

“I was like, ‘guess what, I don’t wear golf shirts,’ ” she said. “Every time we do the board picture, I’m in the middle because we do the rose among the thorns. Come on guys, you all have daughters. You need to stop this.”

Bloomfield first started as a lobbyist at NTCA 30 years ago, when she said it was a “barren wasteland for women in the tech industry.”

“I will say that there were numerous meetings where I would catch myself unconsciously looking around the table, thinking how few women were actually seated at the table,” she added.

She left after 20 years for stints at Qwest and Verizon, before returning as CEO nine years ago. Bloomfield says there is more to be done to improve representation.

“I would have told you that 30 years forward, you would see probably more equal representation around the table. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t a lot of terrific women in the industry, but proportionally, it is still fewer than I would have thought,” she said.

Many of the industry’s other top groups also boast women in key positions. In 2013, Victoria Espinel became CEO of BSA | The Software Alliance, which represents enterprise software companies and startups. She was joined in 2014 by Linda Moore, who became CEO of TechNet, a network of tech industry executives, and Meredith Baker, who became CEO of CTIA, which represents the U.S. wireless communications industry.

Moore was deputy political director for former President Clinton, as well as a presidential campaign aide before TechNet. Espinel was former President Obama’s adviser on intellectual property and the first chief trade negotiator for intellectual property and innovation at the United States Trade Representative office.

“There were several of us [women] who were appointed heads of tech associations at the same time. We all noticed it and were excited about it,” Moore said. “We get together from time to

time and support each other, share best practices and really cheer each other on when we have successes.”

“Definitely there’s been some progress and definitely there’s a lot more that needs to be done,” Espinel said about women in tech.

Baker first started at CTIA 20 years ago as a lobbyist. She left for stints on George W. Bush’s presidential campaign, the Commerce Department, NBC Universal and on the Federal Communications Commission.

“I think that everything gets better for women every year and there’s always more to be done,” she said.

Baker said the changes at lobbying groups reflect the importance of tech in everyday life.

“It’s not necessarily a men, women thing but wireless is now essential to our life. It’s no longer just the technical issues that we’re dealing with, it’s no longer a luxury item, it’s a necessity, so it’s core to everything that we do,” she said.

For Bloomfield, there are unique challenges in the rural broadband industry.

“[There’s] a traditional mindset that telephone companies have to be run by somebody who actually understands how to drive a backhoe, which is not true,” she said. “Second is, rural companies and rural demographics can be a little bit more challenging for female leadership because there are few role models.”

She said female members still often feel out of place at meetings outside D.C.

“They never know whether they should hang out with their fellow general managers who are guys by the bar or they should hang out around the cocktail tables with the spouses who are sharing recipes,” she added.

Expanding the ranks of women in these groups is also a full-time effort.

NTCA’s corporate board has 12 men on it, with one woman joining in the fall.

“Every time I have a board or trustee position open, I have a women listserv and I send it out to basically say, ‘this is going out, I really hope you all look at this,’ ” Bloomfield said.

Moore touted the progress within her group’s member companies. She noted that when Cisco’s CEO Chuck Robbins took over in 2015, he established a leadership team that was more than half women and minorities.

“You find that to be pretty common across our membership companies,” Moore said. “I definitely make a mental note every time I see a woman that I’ve gotten to know who has founded her own company, who has gotten acquired or what have you.”

TechNet’s staff is over 50 percent female and the leadership team includes Latino, African American and LGBT people.

When Espinel took over at BSA, the board had only three women on it. Now, eight of the 20 board members are women.

“Which just means the tech companies are hiring the very best people that are out there,” she said.

BSA and CTIA’s staffs are both over 50 percent female.

Baker said member companies have also been instrumental in improving diversity.

“I really appreciate it that Verizon and AT&T, T-Mobile, Sprint, they’re all committed not only to working to make this city more diverse but also to make their companies more diverse,” she said.

For the tech industry’s voices in Washington, it is a crucial time. Silicon Valley is facing a host of challenges from both Democrats and Republicans over the industry’s market power and impact on consumers, as well as how web companies moderate content. Companies are also scrambling to deal with the fallout from [President Trump](#)’s trade policies and to secure investments in broadband and tech education.

Even as they juggle those issues, industry heads are keeping up their push for efforts on diversity.

Espinel and her team are urging lawmakers to pass legislation to boost STEM education and expand opportunities in tech, citing the Equality Act, Building Blocks of STEM Act and the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, to name a few.

Under her leadership, BSA started the D.C. branch of Girls Who Code. Espinel also noted a program to give military spouses software training and a program that targets women who have been out of the workforce.

“There’s just such an untapped market there of incredibly smart, talented women, that are out of the workforce for some time,” she said.

Bloomfield and her team are also pushing for more STEM development.

“I do think it comes from people kicking open doors and saying, ‘come on in, check out the tires, let’s run an internship program, let’s run an app challenge. Let’s figure out ways to make it less daunting,’” she said.

Moore is a champion of the Building Blocks of STEM Act, as well as legislation for more science education funding.

“We champion so many things, all these initiatives, all these bills, all these pieces of legislation that are trying to change the STEM pipeline. I feel like that’s a huge goal that not just I have but all members of the TechNet team have,” she said.

[Georgia Gov. Kemp rakes in \\$726K after the session for his re-election](#)

Gov. Brian Kemp has only been in office six months, but he’s already preparing for a tough, costly re-election campaign in 2022.

Kemp reported Monday that his campaign had raised \$726,000 between the end of the 2019 General Assembly session in April and June 30.

As of last week, his campaign for re-election had \$1.27 million socked away for a possible rematch with Democrat Stacey Abrams, who has yet to indicate whether she’ll have another go at the Republican in 3 1/2 years.

While Abrams hasn’t announced what she might run for, Kemp is building a war chest with the expensive 2018 campaign fresh in his memory.

Kemp narrowly beat Abrams in a hotly contested gubernatorial race [that cost about \\$100 million when the candidates and groups supporting them are included in the calculation.](#)

In her end-of-the-year report, Abrams' campaign said she spent \$27.4 million, the most any candidate has ever spent to run for governor in Georgia. Kemp wasn't far behind at \$21.4 million.

>> **Related:** [Stacey Abrams' voting rights group raises \\$3.9 million in six months](#)

>> [David Perdue raises nearly \\$2M more for re-election bid](#)

>> [Tomlinson raises \\$520K in first Senate fundraising test](#)

Abrams has a national fundraising reach, [taking in thousands of donations from outside of Georgia](#), while Kemp raised most of his money locally.

But Republicans currently run the statehouse, and that advantage for Kemp has shown up in his most recent reports.

Before Kemp won the nomination, statehouse lobbyists, political action committees and traditional big donors backed then-Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle. But that all changed when Kemp hammered Cagle in the July GOP primary runoff. [The lobbyists and other donors' allegiance, and money, shifted to Kemp.](#)

A quick review of Kemp's latest report — from April through the end of June — showed he collected about \$100,000 from statehouse lobbyists and their firms. Lobbyists for GeorgiaLink, which may have the longest list of powerful clients at the statehouse, contributed \$23,500 alone. Mark Middleton, a longtime lobbyist who served on Kemp's transition team, and his wife contributed \$14,000.

PACs and business groups with lobbyists gave an additional \$75,000 to Kemp's re-election campaign. They included Georgia Power, the Alliance of Community Hospitals, the Community Bankers Association, UPS and nursing home giant United Health Services.

Kemp's campaign also received a boost from numerous leading business executives, such as automobile dealer Mark Hennessy (\$19,000) and boutique hotel developer Richard Kessler (\$18,100).

[Former state Sen. Jeremy Hutchinson pleads guilty to bribery charge in Missouri](#)

Former Arkansas Sen. Jeremy Hutchinson has pleaded guilty in federal court to another bribery charge.

Hutchinson, 45, pleaded guilty Monday to one count of conspiracy to commit federal program bribery regarding "his role in a multi-million-dollar public corruption scheme that involved embezzlement, bribes and illegal campaign contributions for elected public officials," a news release by the office of the U.S. Attorney of the Western District of Missouri states.

Hutchinson is subject to a sentence of up to five years in federal prison without parole and a fine of up to \$250,000 for this charge.

A sentencing hearing will be scheduled following a pre-sentence investigation by the U.S. Probation Office.

On June 25, Hutchinson pleaded guilty in the Eastern District of Arkansas to accepting bribes and falsifying tax records, affirming during a court hearing that he received thousands of dollars from lobbyists seeking to influence state policy. Hutchinson faces a maximum sentence of 13 years in prison for those charges.

The lawmaker, a nephew of Gov. Asa Hutchinson, resigned his Senate seat after a federal grand jury indicted him last August for misusing campaign money and knowingly underreporting thousands of dollars in taxes.

Lobbyists Hired To Seek State Incentives For Snappers Stadium

The effort to get a new stadium for the Beloit Snappers could include the use of state tax dollars, with the team hiring two lobbyists tasked with securing economic development incentives for the project.

Lobbyists Peter Kammer and Nels A. Rude are now authorized to lobby on behalf of the Beloit Professional Baseball Association, according to a June 21 filing at the Wisconsin Ethics Commission.

The Snappers could ask the state for around \$2 million to \$3 million in funding that would include major private investment for the project, according to a source familiar with the effort who spoke to the *Beloit Daily News* on condition of anonymity.

The mechanism used by the team to net public funds would come through a newly-established building program in the state budget that's yet to be signed by Gov. Tony Evers, but has passed both chambers of the Wisconsin Legislature.

The "Non-State Local Project Grant Program" included in the state capital budget would provide \$25 million of general fund supported borrowing to establish a grant program to assist facility construction of non-state organizations, but require municipalities to apply for funding on behalf of the requesting organization. According to the budget item, the state would provide no more than \$5 million of the total cost of the local project. The state building commission would select grant recipients and amounts, including a "finding of public purpose" before awarding funding, according to the motion.

Beloit City Manager Lori Curtis Luther said if the state budget is approved to include the public funding mechanism, she would bring the matter to the Beloit City Council to let councilors "carefully review the option."

"The city has a long-standing record of working in partnership with the Snappers," Luther said.

In August of last year, the Snappers signed a memorandum of understanding with two investor groups for the team. The entities have not been publicly named, and the MOU sets up the framework for opening a new stadium in Beloit. As previously reported by the *Beloit Daily News*, a new stadium could potentially be located downtown, but any location would need to be approved by the city council.

Snappers President Dennis Conerton could not be reached for comment after multiple attempts.

In an interview with the *Beloit Daily News* on June 25, Conerton said under new ownership there will be an operator of the club and the stadium itself would be operated by a stadium authority. The team has also hired consulting firm McDonald Schaefer, to assist in the effort, Conerton said.

Rep. Amy Loudenbeck, R-Clinton, and Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, said they were in favor of the team receiving public funds and staying in Beloit. The legislators said they supported the effort due to the team's history in Beloit and other similar projects netting funding in Milwaukee and Green Bay.

Loudenbeck said her office set up a June 5 meeting with representatives from the Snappers and state legislative leaders.

"At the meeting, the Snappers indicated they were working on a fundraising campaign and felt that a commitment of state support would help them raise additional funds as projects with a public sector partner are perceived more favorably by prospective donors," Loudonbeck said. "I support the efforts of the Snappers and the community to invest in a new downtown stadium and think it would be a great asset to the entire region."

Spreitzer said if a "small amount" of state funds could move the project forward, it would be "good for Beloit and good for Wisconsin."

"I am supportive of finding ways to leverage a public/private partnership to bring together the needed funding to the Snappers in Beloit and bring tourists from around the area here to see games," Spreitzer said.

[Gov. Polis hires firm of his former campaign spokeswoman to lobby the federal government](#)

Gov. Jared Polis hired a team at Squire Patton Boggs to lobby the federal government on behalf of his administration, a contract that could pay up to \$144,000 a year and includes a former top campaign adviser.

The two parties signed the agreement June 10, and Squire Patton Boggs filed a [lobbying registration](#) 11 days later with the U.S. House of Representatives stating it would represent the governor's office.

One of the lobbyists working for the administration in Washington is Mara Sheldon, who served as communications director for Polis' gubernatorial campaign. She's a former longtime aide to several Democratic members of Congress and joined Squire Patton Boggs in April.

When it made the hire, the firm [touted her work](#) in "health care, environment, and water issues, and banking and financial services."

"We went through a very thorough bid process that resulted in the hiring of Squire Patton Boggs," Polis' spokesman Conor Cahill said in a written statement. "They have a strong track record of success in federal policy and we feel confident that they will ensure that Coloradans interest are protected at the federal level."

The two governors before former Gov. John Hickenlooper didn't hire contract Washington lobbyists, according to the [federal lobbying database](#).

Hickenlooper's lobbying [arrangement came under scrutiny](#) when the former governor's chief of staff left to return to work at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, the firm that lobbied for Hickenlooper's administration. Questions about the administration's close ties to the law firm [led Hickenlooper to not renew the contract](#), which was worth more than \$200,000 a year.

Polis hired Squire Patton Boggs, an international law firm based in Cleveland with offices in Denver and Washington, from a pool of four firms that applied for the contract in early April.

Washington, D.C.-based firms Capitol Counsel, Monument Advocacy and Van Scoyoc Associates also applied for the contract. All four firms proposed a \$12,000 per month fee. Squire Patton Boggs and Capitol Counsel were interviewed, but neither Polis nor Sheldon participated in the interviews.

Sheldon and Squire Patton Boggs deferred comment to Polis' office.

The contract with the firm, [obtained by The Sun](#), provides up to \$12,000 a month as payment over the next year, the maximum allowed under the bid request. It requires monthly reports, periodic updates and interaction with Polis and his executive staff.

Polis served in Congress for 10 years before becoming governor and he emphasized in the 2018 campaign that his experience would give Colorado clout in Washington.

The new contract costs less than [the terms](#) outlined between Hickenlooper's administration and Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck. That firm [earned \\$50,000](#) in the first quarter of 2018 and \$170,000 in 2017. Hickenlooper [canceled the contract](#) in November 2017, after former chief of staff Doug Friednash returned to the firm.

Sheldon was the first staffer Polis hired for his campaign and the last to leave, working through the inauguration. She [encountered controversy](#) in the final weeks of the campaign after a confrontation with a right-wing activist at a campaign rally.

"The thorough bid process resulted in the hiring of a firm with a presence in D.C. and Colorado, and hundreds of individuals with federal backgrounds and expertise, including Mara who will help deliver results for Colorado, do it at a lower cost and help ensure the interests of Coloradans are heard at the federal level," Cahill said in a statement.

Another lobbyist for the administration named in the new contract is Mike Dino, who's worked on various Democratic political efforts, including the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver and Hickenlooper's 2006 Denver mayoral contest. He served as an occasional political [commentator for Denver's CBS4](#) television station during the 2018 election.

The other two names on the contract are [Victoria Cram](#) and [Pamela Welsh](#), who both work in the firm's Washington office. Cram cochairs the firm's transportation, infrastructure and local government practice. Welsh helps the firm represent the cities of San Diego and San Jose, California, as well as other clients.

The company said it would lobby for the Polis administration on "general federal issues relevant to state government on water, health, criminal justice reform, education, public lands, immigration, tax, and trade," according to a federal disclosure.

Other Squire Patton Boggs federal lobbying clients from Colorado this year include Denver Water, Commerce City, Jefferson County and the Colorado Coalition for Developmental Disabilities.

Brownstein, the Denver-based firm, earlier this year [came under fire for representing Saudi Arabia](#), particularly after Saudi government agents killed Washington Post journalist Jamal Kahshoggi in Turkey last October. The Saudi government [paid the firm \\$1.8 million](#) in 2018.

Squire Patton Boggs also represented Saudi Arabia in 2018, receiving [payments of \\$579,940](#).

Squire Patton Boggs [ranks fourth](#) in federal lobbyist income in the nation thus far this year at \$6.7 million, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. In 2018, the [company earned \\$24.2 million](#), also in fourth place.

Brownstein Hyatt ranked [second in 2018](#) with income of \$31.3 million, and second thus far this year with income of nearly \$9.1 million, according to the center's OpenSecrets data.

Brownstein wasn't among the applicants for the contract with Polis' office. That firm's lobbyists [represented big tobacco companies](#) to help defeat the governor's proposal for higher taxes on nicotine products in the waning days of Colorado's 2019 legislative session.

[New ethics watchdog wanted in Connecticut](#)

The day Carol Carson arrived in Connecticut to become the state's chief ethics regulator, she learned that her agency no longer had the legal means to investigate public officials — a disconcerting state of affairs, even if temporary. That was in December 2007.

On Thursday, the Citizens' Ethics Advisory Board created an executive search committee to oversee the selection of Carson's successor as executive director of the Office of State Ethics, an agency that was new and struggling to find its way when Carson was hired.

Carson, 64, who is retiring on Aug. 1, is credited with returning stability and credibility to the role of ethics watchdog, enforcing the ethics code for state officials and overseeing the multi-million-dollar lobbying industry at the Capitol. Since her job was posted on June 6, the board has received 60 applications. The deadline for applying is Monday.

"Let's be clear about something: There is no replacing Carol Carson," said Dena Castricone, the board's chair.

The State Ethics Commission was dismantled in 2005 amid bitter staff fights that cost the executive director his job the previous year. The successor agency, the Office of State Ethics, was paralyzed in its early years by a director who resigned, criticized as ineffective.

"There were so many things going on," Carson said.

There was the matter of the lapse in the regulatory authority of the agency to do its job.

Emergency regulations allowing the new agency to operate had expired as she arrived, and the legislature initially refused to approve a permanent regulatory structure. It was on her first or second day that Carson introduced herself to the legislature's Regulations Review Committee.

Carson was hired from Boston, where she had been an investigator and then an executive at the Massachusetts State Ethics Commission.

"The agency when I came was still an agency that was getting ready to do something," Carson said. "I wasn't totally surprised by that, but there was a lot — there was staffing, there was I.T., there was the really basic, basic level of organizing things."

While Carson restored stability to the office, her tenure has not been without challenges to the independence and resources of ethics regulators and two other major watchdog agencies, the State Elections Enforcement Commission and the Freedom of Information Commission.

During the administration of Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, they were reorganized under the umbrella of the Office of Government Accountability, whose director publicly asserted she considered herself answerable to the governor.

The watchdogs are once again autonomous, though not immune from budget pressures.

"I think that watchdog agencies need three things to be effective. They need independence. They need enforcement authority. And they need adequate resources," Carson said. "To my successor, I would advise making sure you do the best job you can to maintain all three of those things."

The Office of State Ethics had 21 positions when she arrived.

It now has 14.

Asked if those resources are adequate, she does not hesitate to answer: “No, they are not. We may not have ended in deficit this year, but we are on the cusp.”

Castricone said the agency is a watchdog, but one that is intent on helping officials avoid problems with guidance and advice. Under Carson, she said, the office has struck an appropriate balance of guidance and enforcement.

“In terms of the balance, I think most people in state government are like you and I. We wake up, go to work and try to do the best job we can,” Carson said. “So we provide them guidance, advice and education.”

But it also investigates and pursues significant fines against state employees who misuse their public positions or lobbyists who violate the state ethics code.

In March, the ethics board fined a lobbying firm \$10,000 for billing the Connecticut Technical High School System for work it did for a private client. The same month, the board fined a UConn official \$20,000 for using her position to land a \$50,000 fellowship for her husband.

“There will be people that are trying to game the system, but most people aren’t like that,” Carson said. “Those people who are like that, who are willing to step over the line in violation of the code, our job is to fairly and vigorously enforce the law.”

One tension in her business is that the more success the Office of State Ethics has keeping people from trouble, the less apparent is its reason for existing.

“We’re a scandal-driven business. We get funding when there is a scandal,” she said. “As soon as we do a good job, we see less resources. We’re kind of like fire departments in that way. If they are doing their job well and educating people about safety, everybody is saying, ‘These guys are just sitting around the firehouse.’

“And they’re not.”