

Don't let legislators be influenced secretly

POINT COUNTERPOINT: Alaska's lobbying law

In 1996 thousands of Alaskans signed an initiative petition to prevent lobbyists from holding candidate fundraisers. The petition also prohibited lobbyists from giving money to candidates outside a lobbyist's district. Pressured by voters, the Legislature adopted these prohibitions. Two parallel bills filed this session by Republican legislators Ralph Seekins (SB 86) and Lesil McGuire (HB 106) weaken these restrictions. These bills, combined with Governor Murkowski's plan to eliminate our campaign watchdog agency, take us in the wrong direction.

The Seekins and McGuire bills address a very small class of people – those who are paid to lobby “to influence legislation” or regulations. The bills don't affect the vast majority of Alaskans, who do not get paid to contact, write to or testify before legislators.

HB 106 and SB 86 change our lobbying laws in two ways. First, they exempt most lobbyists from fundraising and donation rules the voters demanded. Second, they eliminate registration requirements for most paid lobbyists, changing the current “sunshine” rule that lets the public know who is paid to lobby the Legislature.

HB 106 and SB 86 loosen the rules for the largest group of people who lobby our Legislature. The bills weaken the rules that apply to corporate CEO's, executives, business owners, managers and employees when they are sent by their businesses to lobby the Legislature. A small handful of people who specifically advertise themselves as “professional lobbyists” remain subject to existing registration and fundraising rules. But the presidents and executives at Alaska's largest oil and other corporations, and others paid by their businesses to lobby – for things including minimum wage reductions, tax breaks and subsidies this session – don't advertise themselves as professional lobbyists.

Representative McGuire's bill exempts this latter group from Alaska's lobbying laws if they lobby for up to 25% of their income in a month. Thus a corporate president who works 50 hours per week (200 hours per month) could lobby legislators for 50 hours a month. He could then fundraise for every legislator he lobbied. Alaskans would never know about this because the registration rules would also be waived. Senator Seekins' bill would exempt these lobbyists unless they lobby more than 80 hours/month. Under either bill, that's a lot of unreported lobbying.

Government is at its best when it operates in the open, and when it builds trust with the public. Letting lobbyists donate more money to more legislators doesn't build public trust. Nor does letting them operate in the dark. That's why I oppose these proposed changes to our lobbying laws.

Representative Les Gara represents District 23 in Anchorage.

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