Special Session: The Texas Legislature Must Ban Taxpayer-Funded Lobbying

Despite significant efforts by grassroots Texans, the Texas House of Representatives failed to pass legislation this spring that would have banned taxpayer-funded lobbying — where local governments use taxpayer money to lobby the Legislature against the interests of Texans who live in their jurisdictions.

However, Governor Greg Abbott has included a ban on taxpayer-funded lobbying on the call for the special session of the Legislature that began on July 21st. Already, six bills have been filed to eliminate the practice. With the special session now underway, Texans still have time to let their legislators and legislative leaders know this issue is a priority.

The Problem: Drowning Out Citizens' Voices

Texans' right to petition their government is enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and dates back to the Magna Carta of 1215. Despite this, taxpayer-funded lobbying is increasingly drowning out citizen voices in Austin.

Local governments, using taxpayer dollars, are hiring lobbyists to advocate against the interests of the very people they're meant to represent. In one example from 2019, rural Texans testified against bills that would have expanded property tax abatements for politically connected businesses. Yet for every citizen who showed up, there were multiple lobbyists - representing local governments, the benefiting businesses, and their affiliated organizations - all working against the interests of the public.

Texans overwhelmingly petition their state officials to lower taxes and rein in government spending. However, lobbyists hired by local governments often push for more spending and higher taxes, creating an uneven playing field where citizens are outnumbered and too often ignored.

The Scale of the Issue

In 2017, local Texas governments spent $41 million on registered lobbyists. According to the Texas Public Policy Foundation, this spending has skyrocketed in recent years, to $75 million in 2021 and an estimated $98.6 million in 2023. Local governments are pouring nearly $100 million of taxpayer dollars into lobbying the Legislature for more spending, higher taxes, and expanded regulatory power.

Taxpayer-funded lobbyists are not just hired to pass legislation; they are hired to kill citizen-priority legislation, stop investigations and audits into government practices, and block efforts to improve transparency.

Protecting Against Government Corruption

One of the most dangerous aspects of taxpayer-funded lobbying is its use to shield government entities from accountability. Lobbyists paid with public funds are often deployed to block audits, investigations, and transparency measures that could expose waste, fraud, and corruption within local governments.

This is not just about passing or defeating legislation; it's about protecting against government corruption. Public officials should not be using taxpayer dollars to prevent accountability or conceal misconduct. Yet, this is precisely what happens when taxpayer-funded lobbyists work to suppress audits and limit oversight.

The Solution: Ban Taxpayer-Funded Lobbying

To restore Texans' right to petition their government without interference, the Texas Legislature must take decisive action.

Here are key steps that must be implemented:

1. Ban Lobbying with Public Funds: Local governments should be prohibited from using taxpayer money to employ or contract with registered lobbyists. Public funds should not be used to cover any lobbying expenses.

2. Prohibit Membership Dues to Lobbyist Organizations: Government agencies, cities, counties, and school boards should be barred from using taxpayer money to pay membership dues to any organization that employs or contracts with registered lobbyists, such as the Texas Municipal League or the Texas Association of School Boards.

3. Stop Influence on Legislative Measures: Political subdivisions must be prevented from using public money to influence the passage or defeat of any legislative measure.

4. Ban Lobbying by Businesses Receiving Tax Abatements: Any business receiving property tax abatements from local governments should be prohibited from employing or contracting with registered lobbyists. These businesses should not be able to lobby for more taxpayer-funded perks.

Conclusion

Taxpayer-funded lobbying is an abuse of public trust. The voices of Texans are being drowned out by well-funded lobbyists hired with their own tax dollars. Worse, taxpayer-funded lobbyists are being used to block government transparency, shield corruption, and oppose the interests of those they claim to represent.

The Texas Legislature must act to restore the balance of power and protect citizens'

right to petition their government without interference from local governments and special interests. By implementing these reforms, we can ensure that the interests of Texans—not lobbyists—are heard in Austin.

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