

Florida cities and counties fritter away millions on taxpayer-funded lobbyists



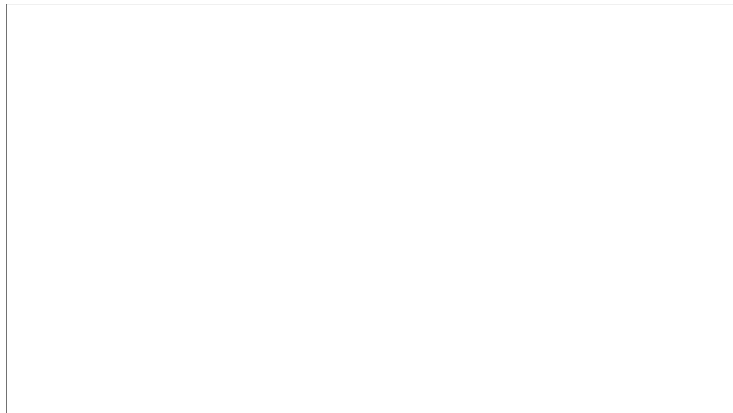
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For years, local politicians have gotten away with transferring hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to their favorite lobbyists, ostensibly to represent them in Tallahassee and Washington.

The influence peddlers reciprocate with equal generosity, kicking back prodigious chunks of money to city and county commissions and school board members by bundling up campaign contributions or by sponsoring fundraisers. In South Florida politics, this amounts to the circle of life.

What makes public-funded lobbying so unseemly, of course, is that we elect a cadre of representatives and senators to look after the interests of the folks back home. Lavishing local taxpayer money on lobbyists would seem to be redundant. We're already paying (and plenty) for that service, aren't we?

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For years, newspapers like the Miami Herald, the Tampa Bay Times and the Orlando Sentinel have been calling this a disgrace. To no effect. These practitioners are beyond shame.

But three weeks ago, when Richard Corcoran said the word, it was like thunder bolt striking the state capitol. “I think it’s a disgrace that taxpayer dollars are used to hire lobbyists when we elect people to represent them,” the incoming speaker of the House told Steve Bousquet of the Miami Herald/Tampa Bay Times Tallahassee Bureau.

Corcoran may be a ruthless slash-and-burn right-wing ideologue, but at least on the matter of taxpayer-funded lobbying, the man deserves a hug. (Just watch your back.)



I THINK IT’S A DISGRACE THAT TAXPAYER DOLLARS ARE USED TO HIRE LOBBYISTS WHEN WE ELECT PEOPLE TO REPRESENT THEM.

Incoming House Speaker Richard Corcoran

It’s not that Miami-Dade and Broward counties have hired a piddling lobbyist or two to keep an eye on the state Legislature. Miami-Dade has 20 lobbyists on contract in Tallahassee. They must be stumbling over one another in the capitol. Meanwhile, the city of Miami has a dozen more. Miami Beach apparently needs nine. Peruse the list of clients on the Florida lobbyist register and you’ll find a gang for nearly every Podunk town in the county. Opa-locka may be bankrupt, but the town can apparently afford three lobbyists.

Oh, there’s more. The Miami-Dade School Board will be doling out taxpayer money for eight lobbyists, one more than the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority.

It’s the same racket in Broward, where the county has 23 lobbyists under contract, the sheriff has six, the property appraiser pays four, the clerk of courts has a couple. Same with the cities, starting with Fort Lauderdale’s eight, one fewer than Hollywood. Miramar and Lauderdale Lakes both dip into their middling city coffers to hire seven lobbyists each. Eight lobbyists list Pembroke Pines as a client. And so it goes.

Down in the southernmost reaches of South Florida, the lobbyist register lists Monroe County with a single lobbyist, the Monroe County Board of Commissioners with two lobbyists and — inexplicably — the Monroe County Board of County Commissioners with 10. Add ’em up and surely Monroe County (even without counting the six under contract to Key West) has more state lobbyists per capita than any other joint in Florida.

All this could make a fiscal conservative’s head explode. Town after town. County after county. Public universities. Public hospital districts. Airports. Seaports. Water management districts. Transit authorities. Highway authorities. Even state agencies hire lobbyists to troop across the street and butter up legislators. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, known for its infamous massacre of black bears last year, has 21 hired guns working the Legislature.

We’re not just frittering away our money on Tallahassee lobbyists. Six years ago, the Miami Herald discovered that Miami-Dade County spent more on Washington lobbyists than any other county in the country. Forty-nine *states* spent less on lobbyists than Miami-Dade. The county had held that distinction for seven years running. (Broward County outspent all but three states in this ignominious category.)

So what do we get for our money (other than fat campaign contributions for our city and county commissioners)? Nada, at least in Washington, where nothing gets done. Tallahassee, for our money, likes to dole out preemption bills, designed to undercut local government. Cities can’t go beyond state law to limit gunslingers, cigarette smoking, beekeeping or ban exotic animals, even jungle cats. If a homeowner has a state wildlife permit for a wolf or a tiger or a black mamba, there’s nothing a city commission can do about it. Local governments are limited in how they can regulate short-term vacation rentals. Cities and counties can’t ban plastic bags or fracking or limit landscaping fertilizer or polystyrene containers. All this, despite the hundreds of millions of dollars local governments have paid their army of lobbyists.

Ten years ago I happened to be sitting in the Broward County Commission chambers as the county was approving another long list of lobbyist contracts. Commissioner Stacy Ritter noted that during her time in the Legislature, one of the fellows about to get his \$35,000 contract renewed had never visited her office. Not once.

Of course, that’s not the object of this perennial exercise. No one expects legislative results. This is all about campaign contributions.

Sure it’s a disgrace. Maybe Speaker Corcoran can reign in taxpayer-funded lobbying. Of course, that might not sit well with his lobbyist brother Michael, who represents a passel of public entities. Including the cities of Miami and Miami Beach.