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Few spend time filing lobbyist forms New law targets executive branch wining & dining

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BATON ROUGE -- During the 2004 legislative session, Gov. Kathleen Blanco championed a new law to require people who wine and dine executive branch officials to report their spending, saying it would shine a spotlight on special-interest influence in state government.

But since the law went into effect at the beginning of this year, only 75 people have registered as lobbyists of the executive branch, which includes all of the agencies, offices of statewide elected officials and the state's many boards and commissions. And only 30 have documented any spending in reports that were filed this week, leaving open the questions of how effective the new requirement will be and if state agencies have done a sufficient job informing people about the reports.

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"Given the vast array of governmental agencies that are brought under this definition, I thought it would have been more people in lobbying executive branch agencies," said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council.

"I'm surprised," said longtime lobbyist Randy Haynie, who said he expects the number of people who register as lobbying the executive branch to increase over time.

For many years, lobbyists who wine and dine legislators have been required to register and report spending with the state Board of Ethics. Currently, 496 people are registered to lobby

legislators, with 118 reporting spending at least some money in the first six months of the year, which included the two-month legislative session, for a total of \$219,420. That number is not conclusive, as the board Thursday had not received in the mail or processed all of the reports that were due Monday.

In comparison, \$14,696 was spent on entertaining executive branch officials between Jan. 1 and June 30, according to the reports received by Thursday, although one lobbyist indicated in his legislative lobbying report that he also spent \$1,000 on Public Service Commissioner Jay Blossman.

Reports could grow

Once the executive branch lobbying law becomes better known, Haynie said, he expects that many people who do not consider themselves professional lobbyists, but who routinely communicate with state employees and entertain them at meals, will file reports. Only seven of the 75 people who registered for lobbying the executive branch were first-time lobbyists; the other 68 were already registered as legislative lobbyists.

The limited scope of the law might also have significantly narrowed the group of people who are required to report how much they spent on meals for state officials. Under Louisiana law, an executive branch lobbyist is someone who is employed to represent a company or organization and who spends at least \$500 in a calendar year entertaining officials.

"It may be that many lobbyists have decided to restrict their expenditures to less than \$500 to avoid having to report," said Gray Sexton, executive director of the state Board of Ethics, which oversees the lobbying disclosure reports.

Blanco's spokeswoman said it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the new law because there is no record to compare it with.

"The governor wanted there to be disclosure so there is a certain amount of transparency and so people knew who was doing what and how much of it," spokeswoman Denise Bottcher said. She added that the ethics board will have to work on making sure people know about the new requirements.

Under Louisiana law, it is illegal for state employees or public officials to receive gifts in connection with their jobs, although they can be treated to a meal or drinks as long as the person paying is present. Elected officials also have an exemption that allows them to receive tickets to sporting or cultural events.

As with the legislative lobbying reports, the executive branch lobbying documents often don't provide much detail about who was the recipient of a lobbyist's largess. Lobbyists are required to report the name of the person who was taken out to lunch or dinner only if they spend more than \$50 on a specific occasion or more than \$250 in a six-month reporting period.

Dearth of details

Michael Cuccia, who is registered to lobby for Daiichi Pharmaceutical Corp. of New Jersey, reported spending the most money on a single agency, shelling out \$3,304 for employees of the Department of Health and Hospitals. Cuccia did not identify any specific officials or staff members.

The second-largest recipient was the governor's office, to the tune of \$2,465, which included \$348 on meals for the governor and \$353 spent on Raymond Blanco, her husband. The only staffer specified in any of the reports was Rochelle Dugas, Blanco's legislative director, for whom two lobbyists bought \$343 worth of meals, according to the reports.

Lobbyists for the Louisiana Hospital Association spent the most money on executive branch entertaining, targeted specifically at the governor's office. The group's lobbyists spent \$1,830 during the legislative session, when they were working with the Blanco administration to pass a tax on private hospitals that will enable most of them to recoup more money from Medicaid.

Part of the hospital group's spending was \$436 reported by Sean Prados, one of its leading lobbyists, for Blanco's end-of-session party at a Mexican restaurant in Baton Rouge. Eight lobbyists reported donating a total of \$1,925 for that party.

Under a separate law approved during the 2004 legislative session, people who do business with the state's public retirement systems are required to report all of their spending on board members and staff.

Investment managers and other people who work with retirement systems reported spending \$4,225 in the first half of this year and \$7,527 in the last six months of 2004.

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