

Column

Chad Blair: Special Interests Spend Big On Their Lobbyists

Ethics Commission reports provide some details about what Hawaii's professional persuaders spend, and what they earn.

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By Chad Blair    / October 3, 2017

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My previous column on lobbying in Hawaii explained [what defines a lobbyist](#) — for example, being paid to influence legislation.

But lobbying isn't just about money. It's about access and persuasion.

It also often succeeds. One lawmaker who accepts generous donations from the GMO industry said it may not influence his vote, but he did admit he was likely to listen to what they have to say.

I noted that many of the lobbying forms posted on the website of the [Hawaii State Ethics Commission](#) offer few details about how lobbyists spend money. But a handful [do share some items of interest](#) about their spending habits.



Honolulu Police Commission Chair Max Sword at a recent meeting. He is also a lobbyist for Outrigger.

For example, Max Sword of Outrigger Hotels and Resorts spent a lot of money on receptions, meals, food and beverages — about \$9,500 since 2014.

Kyle Datta of Ulupono Initiative plucked down just over \$600 for the same things and spent 10 times that much on gifts over about the same period.

Ron Amemiya and Mel Kahele of the Ironworkers Stabilization Fund each spent tens of thousands of bucks on lobbying since 2013.

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Of the 19 possible categories of lobbying subject areas, both men checked off 18 categories, including agriculture, human services, Hawaiian affairs and health. The only category not checked was “other.”

Some lobbyists have multiple clients, such as Melissa Pavlicek, who represents Apple, Bishop Museum, Chevron, DOW AgroSciences, Hawaiian Airlines, Kamehameha Schools, Safeway and Time Supermarkets.

Bob Toyofuku is another super-lobbyist — for Uber Technologies, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, Compassion and Choices, Hawaiian Humane Society, Hawaii Employers' Mutual Insurance Company, Comcast and Johnson Controls.

Hey, Big Spender

Organizations that lobby also have to [file expenditure reports](#). They show how much money went to individual lobbyists — for example, Outrigger Hotels Hawaii compensated Sword, David Carey III and Ed Case a total of \$35,000 on lobbying in the first four months of this year.

Other big spenders during that period included Kamehameha Schools (\$102,000), Soleil Management Hawaii (\$85,000), Hilton Worldwide (\$56,000), the tobacco lobby Altria Client Services (\$53,000), Syngenta Hawaii (\$48,000), Blue Planet Foundation (\$41,000), Kauai Island Utility Coop (\$41,000) and Hawaii Health Systems Corp Maui region (\$40,000).

Same goes for Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii (\$39,000), Hawaii Government Employees Association (\$32,000), Hawaii Lodging and Tourism Association (\$32,000), Marriott Vacations Worldwide Corp (\$31,000), Caring Across Generations (\$30,000), General Contractors Association of Hawaii (\$27,000), Kaiser Foundation Health Plan (\$25,000), Compassion and Choices (\$24,000) and Hawaii State Teachers Association (\$24,000).



Lobbyist Bob Toyofuku doing his thing at the Capitol in April 2016.

The organizations do not indicate what they were lobbying for, but it's no coincidence that the first four months of the year is when the Hawaii Legislature is in session. Reasonable inferences can be made.

Compassion and Choices, for example, unsuccessfully pushed for aid-in-dying legislation while HSTA backed a failed measure to have a surcharge on residential investment properties and visitor accommodations to fund public education.

But Caring Across Generations was among the groups lobbying for financial support for family caregivers, a measure [signed into law this summer](#).

Also lobbying this year were Boyd Gaming Corp. (\$16,000) and the National Rifle Association (\$5,000), although gambling is illegal in Hawaii and gun-control laws are strong. But these special interests persist.

Lobbying spending reports are due this week [for the special session](#) on funding Honolulu rail. It will be interesting to see how much the visitor

industry spent, given their vehement opposition to increasing the hotel tax.

Time For An Overhaul

As we [reported in June](#), the Honolulu Ethics Commission chief, Jan Yamane, says the city should “completely overhaul” how it tracks the spending of money to influence leaders.

The city currently doesn't require lobbyists to provide any details about how they spend money, and most do not.

Some good news: The Hawaii State Ethics Commission, which administers and enforces [the state's Lobbyists Law](#), is in the early stages of revising its administrative rules.



Honolulu Ethics Commission Director Jan Yamane says the city system of tracking lobbyists needs an overhaul.

Some of the work involves routine housekeeping, but the commission also plans to look at financial disclosures and, later, lobbying disclosures. The goal is to make sure the commission is meeting legislative intent.

One possibility is to combine the disclosures of lobbying groups and lobbyists, since the current system calls for double reporting.

Another is to have electronic filing for all disclosures, including lobbying. That could make it easier for lobbyists to file and for the commission (and the public) to review them.

The Ethics Commission encourages anyone with questions or concerns regarding lobbying to contact the commission for quick, confidential advice, said state Ethics Commission Director Dan Gluck.

Note: The Ulupono Initiative was founded by Pierre and Pam Omidyar. Pierre Omidyar is the CEO and publisher of Civil Beat.

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