

Hiring Federal Lobbyists, Towns Learn Money Talks

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TREASURE ISLAND, Fla. — Rebuffed on several requests for state and federal financing to help rebuild its crumbling bridge, this small resort town was all but resigned to raising the money by doubling the 50-cent bridge toll, increasing property taxes and issuing bonds.

[Skip to next paragraph](#)

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Top Lobbyist Employed	Amount Paid to That Lobbyist
Hiller Hamilton Snider and Odum	\$640,000
Holland and Knight	\$630,000
Flippo and Assoc, R.O.	\$380,000
ed Lowery Jacques Denton and White	\$250,000
Zelden Consulting Group	\$225,000
McBee Strategic Consulting LLC	\$320,000
Bloom Group Inc	\$260,000
Bloom Group Inc	\$220,000

Interactive Graphic: Who Is Lobbying for Earmarks in Your State?

But in a last-ditch gambit, city officials hired a federal lobbyist who had known the local congressman for four decades. Within weeks, the congressman, Representative C. W. Bill Young, called the mayor to say he had slipped a special \$50 million appropriation, known as an earmark, into an omnibus bill.

The city had originally sought \$15 million. But Mr. Young — a [Republican](#) who was then the all-powerful chairman of the Appropriations Committee and, as his lobbyist friend knew, believes public roads should be free — raised it to eliminate the toll.

Since that windfall three years ago, Treasure Island has continued to pay \$5,000 a month to the lobbying firm, Alcalde & Fay, and has continued to reap earmarks: \$500,000 to fix a sewer plant, \$625,000 to repair wooden walkways over the dunes, \$450,000 for pedestrian crosswalks.

"They're worth every penny they get," said Mayor Mary Maloof, who led a parade of antique cars to open the new bridge on June 10. "When we started talking about it, there were plenty of eyebrows raised that we would be doing such a thing. But it's turned out to be a valuable tool for helping us cover costs."

Cities and towns — and school districts and transit authorities and utility agencies — across the country are increasingly reaching for that same toolbox, putting

lobbyists on retainer to leverage their local tax dollars into federal tax dollars.

Since 1998, the number of public entities hiring private firms to represent them in Washington has nearly doubled to 1,421 from 763, as places like Treasure Island, population 7,514, have jumped onboard with behemoths like Miami that have long had lobbyists.

Most of these new clients had never sought earmarks — some had never even heard of them — before someone knocked on their door, essentially offering big pots for a pittance. Others had read in the newspaper about neighbors with lobbyists building bridges or beach walks and felt pressure to keep up with the municipal Joneses.

"We're all in competition for the same dollars, and you want all the advantages you can have," said John Litton, city manager in Lake Mary, Fla., about 20 miles north of Orlando.

The collective bill over eight years has topped \$640 million.

Enlisted almost exclusively to land earmarks, lobbyists for local governments have boomed alongside a broader explosion in such appropriations, to 12,852 items worth \$64 billion last year from 4,219 pet projects totaling \$27.7 billion in 1998. The prolific earmarking does not change the overall budget's bottom line, but how the pie is cut: dollars are doled out, often in secret, at the whim of a lone legislator — often under the influence of a lobbyist — rather than through a competitive process.

It is against the law to use federal money to hire lobbyists. Yet local officials' near-unanimous justification is that the lobbyists pay for themselves many times over through the infusion of federal funds.

Ronald D. Utt, a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation and a frequent critic of earmarks, said he was most troubled at seeing firms solicit public clients with virtual guarantees that they could deliver "dollars for pennies" (or billions for millions).

"The mystery to me is the way they are able to promise returns," Mr. Utt said, pointing to the revolving door between Congressional appropriators' payrolls and lobby shops, as well as to lobbyists' generous campaign contributions. "It goes beyond mere influence peddling to just outright, classic third-world corruption."

The most vivid case of earmark-related corruption came with the conviction this year of [Jack Abramoff](#) for trading huge fees from Indian tribes for influence with lawmakers. Public entities have also played a prominent role in the current federal investigation of the links between Representative Jerry Lewis, the current Appropriations Committee chairman, and the lobbying firm Copeland Lowery Jacquez Denton & White, leading to subpoenas of several of the firm's government clients in Mr. Lewis's Southern California district.

Lobbyists say there is nothing improper in their political activity. In fact, they use it as a selling point. In a 2002 proposal to the City of Pembroke Pines, an Alcalde lobbyist pointed to monthly fund-raisers the firm held at its offices in Arlington, Va., and said attending events "very frequently" for Republicans and [Democrats](#) alike "does allow us to better our local government clients."

- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [4](#)

[Next Page »](#)

Jodi Rudoren reported from Treasure Island, Fla., and Washington for this article, and Aron Pilhofer from New York.

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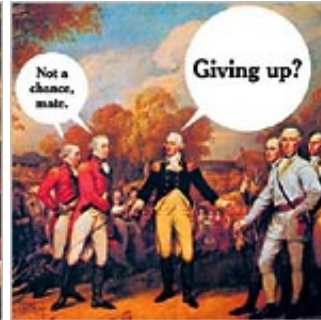


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