



THE PLAIN DEALER

Power shifts to Democratic lobbyists

New crop suddenly in demand

Sunday, April 01, 2007

Mark Naymik
Plain Dealer Politics Writer

When the Wholesale Beer & Wine Association of Ohio assembled its roster of lobbyists this year, it added a new name: David Leland.

Unlike the powerhouse policy pushers the association typically employs to oppose such things as higher alcohol taxes, Leland has not worked the halls of the Statehouse since he was a legislator in 1985.

But Leland, a Democrat and a former state party chairman, has something the others don't: the ear of Ted Strickland, Ohio's new governor.

As the chief fund-raiser for Strickland's 2006 gubernatorial campaign, Leland helped the governor raise more money than any statewide candidate in Ohio history, nearly \$17 million.

A new crop of Democrats in power has spawned a new crop of lobbyists seeking potentially lucrative retainers that haven't been as available to them as to Republicans for some time.

Leland is one of 250 people who registered this year as a new lobbyist, joining a group that totals 1,334.

With Democrats in control of four of the five top statewide offices - forcing the Republican-controlled legislature to share power for the first time in 16 years - people like Leland are in demand.

"We spent some time with him during the campaign, and he does know what he's doing," said Andy Herf, vice president of legislative affairs for the Wholesale Beer & Wine Association.

To take advantage of their newfound influence, some Democrats have hung out their own shingles, while others have joined established lobbying concerns or law firms that want to show off Democratic faces.

Rick Brunner, an attorney who is married to Ohio's new Democratic secretary of state, Jennifer Brunner, is a newly minted lobbyist on his own. He said he joined the ranks to avoid running afoul of ethics rules while working for his law clients.

"People listen to me now," said Brunner, who campaigned with his wife for two years. "I have friends and connections. So when clients ask me to make a call for them, I feel I have to be registered as a lobbyist."

Brunner has two clients, including a large pipe manufacturer.

Charlie Luken, a lawyer and former Democratic mayor of Cincinnati, also became a freshman lobbyist this year.

"I was looking for something to keep me in the business of government and keep the juices flowing," he said.

Luken got to know Strickland and his top aides well when he played Republican gubernatorial opponent Ken Blackwell during Strickland's months of debate rehearsals.

"It's fair to say business picked up in the last few months," said Luken, whose clients include FirstEnergy Corp. "The new administration has meant good things for me, more business activity."

Though lobbying can be good for the bottom line, Luken acknowledged the negative image that comes with representing clients to lawmakers.

"I've been a lawyer, lobbyist, politician and journalist - had I been a used-car salesman, I'd have the bottom five," he joked.

Democrats, Republicans

mix at law firms

Democratic political consultant Don Spicer, who advised the campaigns of Jennifer Brunner and state Treasurer Richard Cordray, also jumped into the lobbying business this year.

"Obviously, with the change in administration, we decided to get into lobbying," said Spicer, whose clients include government consultant Maximus Inc.

"We had some individuals contact us who knew about our involvement in Democratic campaigns, and they were interested in being able to talk to the right people."

Several lobbying firms recruited Sarah Briggs, a respected Democratic Statehouse political operative.

Briggs, who served as political director for the Ohio House Democratic Caucus in 2004 and 2006, starts this week as director of government affairs for the law firm headed by Lee Smith.

Smith, a Democrat, also is a generous contributor to Republicans and earned thousands in legal work through former Republican Attorney General Jim Petro's office.

Smith's firm also is affiliated with Jon Allison, a Republican lobbyist who was chief of staff to former Gov. Bob Taft.

Allison said firms need political diversity to be successful, especially since the GOP still rules the legislature.

"Whether a client wants to get a bill into law or to win a contract with an agency and get it approved by the controlling board, you will have to deal with divided government to get it over the finish line," he said.

Also adding a Democrat to its team is the well-known firm State Street Consultants, founded by Paul Tipps and Neil Clark. It hired John Singleton, a former policy and research aide to the Ohio House Democratic Caucus. Singleton's clients include United HealthCare of Ohio and Ohio University.

The law firm of Schottenstein Zox & Dunn, which also had recent ties to Petro, has hired Jessica Hart as its director of government relations. She registered to lobby this year.

Most recently an employee in the budget department for the city of Columbus, she spent six years as a policy aide to the Ohio House Democrats and was an aide to former State Rep. Dean DePiero, now mayor of Parma. Her clients include the Solid Waste Authority of Central Ohio.

New jobs bring

bigger paychecks

The push by some lobbyists to add Democratic blood is hardly subtle. It surprised Connor Patton, an aide to Democratic State Rep. Mike Foley of Cleveland, who was appointed to the seat last June and elected in November.

In Columbus just six months, Patton was offered a job in January by a Republican-led firm.

Patton said his inexperience was not an issue; the firm liked that he worked for the ranking minority member on the House's powerful Ways and Means Committee.

He said the firm thought he would be a conduit not only to his boss but also to Foley's brother, a

commissioner in Montgomery County who is viewed as a potential congressional candidate.

Patton, who initially considered the job but changed his mind, would not identify the lobbyist to avoid creating a conflict for his boss.

"It was very hard to turn down because the money was so good," Patton said. "For me to leave after six months and work for a Republican just didn't feel right."

In some cases, new lobbyists at a firm can earn \$50,000 a year plus a cut of whatever business they bring in, which can boost their salaries by tens of thousands of dollars. The salary of a solo lobbyist varies widely depending on the number of clients, though even one or two clients can produce a six-figure income.

Changes are typical,

lobbyist leader says

Lobbyist Thomas Pappas, president of the Ohio Lobbying Association, said staffing changes are typical around a new administration.

"Change is sometimes uncomfortable for clients, and they need consultants and people to help them," he said.

But Pappas said he's not seeing a major shuffle since many firms are already bipartisan.

Democrats, however, appear ready to flash their credentials around the Statehouse.

"Being on the Strickland campaign is helpful, but it's also my time as party chairman," Leland explained.

Strickland said that despite his connection to lobbyists like Leland, he won't be swayed by friendships.

"I don't expect my personal interaction or personal interactions of my Cabinet to have an influence on policy decisions," he said. "I respect what lobbyists do for their clients. But when it comes right down to it, my responsibility is to pursue a public policy that's in a public interest, and that's what I will try to do."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

mnaymik@plaind.com, 216-999-4849

© 2007 The Plain Dealer

© 2007 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.