

Voices that carry: Lobbyists say it all

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on his district, he might ask a lobbyist for his or her opinion. In fact, he said, about half the time he talks to lobbyists, it's because he has approached them. Lobbyists can be experts on certain bills and constituents' opinions about the bills, he said.

But he hasn't always felt that way. During his first year in the Legislature, he had a much different attitude about lobbyists.

"I was told that lobbyists were all slimy," Pederson said. "There are a few arm-twisters, but more are educators." Just meeting lobbyists and understanding what their job was really about changed his mind, he said.

Besides, he said, there's nobody in the state of Nebraska who doesn't have a lobbyist.

On charges that lobbyists buy off legislators with little perks like free food, Pederson said the only reason the food was around was they were talking about business during lunchtime.

"If there's a meal, there's a bill to talk about," Pederson said.

Living for the law

There are 290 lobbyists registered in Nebraska, and every day the Legislature is in session, about 30 of them — sometimes more, sometimes less — mill around the Rotunda, peering through the glass wall that separates them from senators, waiting to get a few minutes to talk to senators about how a bill might affect their client.

Lobbyists are not allowed on the floor of the Legislature, so they spend a lot of time sending messages to senators through the red-coated guards of the Legislature doors — the sergeants-at-arms. The lobbyists are often seen escorting senators down long corridors of the Capitol, providing research on constituents' possible views on a bill.

And they do present both negative and positive effects of a bill, Radcliffe said. But it's the spin they put on a bill that counts.

"You balance it in such a way that the scales tip in your direction," he said.

Lobbyists seem to be into the business for two reasons: money and the sense of being involved in government.

Radcliffe is blunt about most of the bills he lobbies for; he wants them to pass not because he believes in them, but because he's getting paid by someone to push them.

"Nobody pays me to implement good public policy," he said. "If someone has a financial interest in legislation, I expect to get paid."

And no one's hiring him because he is an expert on something the bill might deal with. When he was hired by St. Elizabeth's Hospital, for instance, it certainly wasn't because he had a medical degree, he said.

"They didn't hire me because I knew a ... thing about surgery — they hired me because I know how to talk to

people," he said. "It's up to the client to tell me what their interest in a bill is."

But occasionally, Radcliffe will volunteer to lobby for bills he believes in. He lobbied pro-bono last year for a bill that would have repealed the death penalty, he said.

Only about a dozen lobbyists are the "hired-gun, contract" lobbyists like Radcliffe. The rest are volunteers or they do it part time. This means corporations or groups that have more money to hire full time, professional lobbyists get better representation of their interests in the Legislature.

And although Radcliffe admits several groups are under-represented, lobbyist-inequity is all a part of the job. "Life isn't fair," he said.

Other lobbyists profess more idealistic views.

Richard Lombardi took his first lobbying job for the Sierra Club in 1979 for \$1,000 a year.

He said he spends much of his time talking to the people of Nebraska, trying to motivate them to get involved in government.

"The major thing I do is give hope that if you get involved in the legislative process, you can make a difference. Lobbyists don't have power, people have power," Lombardi said.

Radcliffe agrees.

"The most effective lobbyist in the world is the constituent," he said. "It's the people at home."

Shark-like solicitors?

Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha suggested during a floor debate that the official state lobbyist be named the *Carcharodon carcharias*, or the great white shark, described in the dictionary as a man-eater.

"They're voracious predators," Chambers said. If a senator has any oppositions to a certain bill, Chambers said, a lobbyist would try to "consume" their arguments and get them to vote for the bill.

Chambers said lobbyists alternately "bully," then "stroke" senators to get them to vote their way on a bill. But "stroking" doesn't always come in the form of campaign contributions from the lobbyists' principal, Chambers said.

"They might buy (senators) some meat loaf or a chicken sandwich," Chambers said. "Sometimes you can make a person feel obligated by doing them little favors even if they would never give a vote if you put money in their hand."

Chambers said he didn't like to use lobbyists for information, but if they came to him, he would listen.

"I treat them like human beings, but I don't seek them out and I don't take favors from them."

But Lombardi and Radcliffe don't agree with Chambers. They both feel they have a job to do, and believe it is a necessary occupation.

As both Lombardi and Radcliffe said: "Democracy is not a spectator sport."



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