

# Lobbyists pulled in nearly \$8 million in '04

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WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

LINCOLN — Inside the legislative chamber, Nebraska's elected representatives — 49 of them — make the decisions that become law.

They collected \$862,000 in salary and expense reimbursements last year.

Out in the lobby, Nebraska's hired representatives — roughly 300 of them — try to coax state senators to agree with their clients' aims.

Their receipts? Nearly \$8 million

last year, according to an Omaha World-Herald analysis of legislative records. The bulk of the money — almost \$5 million — went to 15 freelance lobbyists or lobbying firms.

Nebraska's lobby now is dominated by six major firms, each of which collected from \$300,000 to more than \$1 million last year.

The biggest? Ruth-Mueller-Robak, which last year became the first firm to top the \$1 million mark.

Kim Robak, former lieutenant governor and former University of Nebraska vice president, joined the

## In Midlands

A look at Nebraska's top four lobbying firms.

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firm last year. It had been a partnership of Robak's husband, William Mueller, and fellow attorney Larry Ruth.

Ruth-Mueller-Robak expects to collect about \$1.14 million in fees for the 2005 legislative session, according to fee amounts reported to the clerk of the Legislature.

Some worry the power of the

lobby will only increase as senior lawmakers depart in waves under term limits that begin in 2006.

"They are almost an institution in themselves," said Jack Gould, an unpaid lobbyist for Common Cause Nebraska. "They know far more than even some senators on how things get done."

But former State Sen. John Lindsay, who began lobbying after leaving the Legislature in 1997, said lobbyists' influence goes only so far.

"The bottom line is the power is in  
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# Lobbying: \$8 million spent in Nebraska last year

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there," he said, gesturing toward the legislative chamber, "not out here. I still can't vote."

As the two-term limit ejects legislators, Gould said he expects that many will head for the lobby, taking advantage of insider knowledge gained as senators.

Former Legislative Speaker Curt Bromm of Wahoo who lost a bid for Congress in 2004, is lobbying this year for five clients, including the Nebraska Telecommunications Association. Reporting fee agreements totaling \$21,000 a month, he could rank among the top-paid lobbyists of 2005.

He is one of 20 former elected state officials registered to lobby. Four former state senators — Loran Schmit (1969-92), Dennis Rasmussen (1973-79), Tom Vickers (1979-86) and Chris Abboud (1983-98) — ranked among the highest-paid lobbyists in 2004.

Gould contended that the trend of lawmakers entering the lobby corps betrays a public trust. Common Cause thinks lawmakers should be required to wait at least a year before lobbying.

"Public service is not to be bought and sold," Gould said. "The inside knowledge you gain here belongs to the people who put you here. I hate to see the Legislature become a graduate school for lobbyists."

Lobbyists and many lawmakers, however, said special interest groups represent the public, too.

Bromm said lobbying keeps him working on issues in which he gained interest and expertise as a lawmaker. He said he's on the same side of issues now as when he was a senator.

"I truly enjoy being around state government," he said. "Even though I knew it would generate some criticism, for me there was no reason not to do it."

Larry Ruth, a partner in Ruth-Mueller-Robak, said lobbyists and interest groups are part of the system.

Founding father James Madison may not have envisioned a



PHIL JOHNSON/THE WORLD-HERALD

Lobbyist Robert Hallstrom, at left above, buttonholes Sen. Doug Cunningham of Wausa, chairman of the Business and Labor Committee, outside the Nebraska legislative chamber.

hired lobby corps when drafting the U.S. Constitution, Ruth said, but he recognized that competing interests would play a check-and-balance role.

With the Constitution protecting citizens' rights to petition the government, Ruth said it's not a big leap for citizens to hire someone to handle the job.

Speaker of the Legislature Kermit Brashear said lobbyists are a fact of governmental life.

"Lobbying is lobbying," he said. "Good, bad or ugly, you've still got significant lobbies, with people with varying degrees of influence. I know of no jurisdiction that is lobby-free."

Brashear said legislators remain in charge of the legislative process. State senators, not lobbyists, resolve issues in Nebraska. "The lobby can only be as powerful as the (legislative) body allows it to be," he said.

State Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha said many Nebraska lawmakers allow lobbyists to be too powerful, whether because of political obligation, personal

friendship or the hope of future career opportunities.

"I don't see these lobbyists as gentlemen," he said. "They're sharks, barracudas and piranhas. They're predators."

Chambers predicted that term limits would make matters worse. Although term-limited senators won't depend on lobbyists as much for re-election help, they may look to the lobby for help in seeking higher office or lining up jobs after they leave the Legislature, Chambers said.

Meanwhile, controversial issues provide plenty of work for the lobby corps.

Seventeen lobbyists this year are working in the "gas wars," a battle between publicly and privately owned utilities to divide natural gas markets in growing communities.

Fifty-five lobbyists are signed up for a battle over storm water management fees.

Business lobbyist Natalie Peetz assembled four top firms — at fees totaling \$50,000 a quarter — for a multiyear effort to

## Big guns

Nebraska's top 15 lobbyists in 2004 and their receipts, according to a compilation of their reports to the Clerk of the Legislature.\*

1. Ruth-Mueller-Robak — \$1,027,590
2. Radcliffe and Associates — \$786,975
3. O'Hara, Lindsay & Associates — \$693,468
4. Cutshall & Associates — \$407,009
5. Gordon Kissel/Erickson & Seders-trom Associates — \$353,359
6. American Communications Group — \$304,203
7. Cavanaugh Law Firm — \$217,847
8. Mary Campbell & Associates — \$188,475
9. Robert Hallstrom — \$177,100
10. H. Jack Moors — \$164,617
11. Schmit Industries — \$163,000
12. Ronald Jensen — \$133,642
13. Coleen Nielsen — \$130,167
14. Michael Kelley — \$113,763
15. Dennis Rasmussen — \$113,471

\*Note: In cases where lobbyists did not report total receipts, amounts were calculated based upon reports filed by their clients. Figures reflect gross receipts without expenses deducted.

seek a new economic development package for Nebraska. They join on-staff lobbyists from the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry, the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and other business groups.

First-year State Sen. Abbie Cornett of Bellevue said she has been surprised by how intensely she has been lobbied.

She first was approached on the natural gas issue at a campaign barbecue before being elected. There have been days when lobbyists called her out of the legislative chamber eight or nine times to talk.

"Lobbying is all fine and good," she said. "But in the end, you have to decide what's best for the state and the people that elected you."