

Money spent on lobbying Nebraska Legislature hit record \$15.6 million in 2015

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By Joe Duggan / World-Herald Bureau, June 1, 2016

LINCOLN — Another year in the Nebraska Legislature, another record amount spent on lobbying.

Special-interest groups spent \$15.6 million in 2015, easily surpassing the record of \$14 million set the previous year, according to an analysis by government watchdog group Common Cause Nebraska.

The 545 principals that hired lobbyists represented an increase of 39 over 2014. The number of paid lobbyists grew by 35 to 351.

The upward trends helped account for an 11 percent increase in spending intended to convince the 49 state senators to pass, or block, legislation, said Jack Gould, issues chairman for Common Cause Nebraska.

“The principals have a firm belief this works,” Gould said Tuesday. “They get what they want or they wouldn’t be doing it.”

Gould couldn’t tie the increase to specific bills or issues before the Legislature during the 90-day session in 2015. Among the most contested votes that year were the death penalty repeal, Medicaid expansion, an increase in the gas tax and authorizing drivers licenses for immigrants brought to the country illegally as children.

But the year continued the long-term trend of more spending on what happens in the legislative chamber. In 2000, the amount spent on lobbying totaled \$3 million.

“There are just more special-interest groups hiring lobbyists. The issues are more complicated, and life is more complicated,” said William Mueller, whose lobbying firm Mueller Robak pulled in \$1.4 million in 2015, making it the top-earning firm for the year.

Radcliffe and Associates was second with \$1.2 million, and O’Hara Lindsay and Associates was third with \$980,000. Another four firms brought in between \$573,000 and \$643,000 for the year.

The largest spender in 2015 was the Nebraska Bankers Association, which paid out \$205,000 for lobbying. It was followed by the League of Nebraska Municipalities (\$194,000); the Association of Nebraska Ethanol Producers (\$188,000); the University of Nebraska (\$166,000); and the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry (\$162,000).

Over the past five years, the Altria Group, the parent company of tobacco giant Philip Morris, has spent \$1.1 million on lobbying in Nebraska. Others in the top five are the Ethanol Producers (\$1 million); the League of Municipalities (\$983,000); TransCanada Corp. (\$925,000); and the Bankers Association (\$740,000).

The report also showed the Omaha Public Schools led all school districts in annual lobbying expenditures with \$67,000. OPS was followed by Millard (\$62,000); Bellevue (\$58,000); Lincoln (\$40,000) and Papillion (\$30,000). Public school districts that hire lobbyists have spent a total of \$2.2 million over the past five years.

“It’s a concern because you’re paying taxes so they can hire professional lobbyists to go down and get more tax money,” Gould said.

Gould used the annual report to call for more detailed disclosures of how lobbyists spend money. State senators must report only gifts valued at \$100 or more. Lobbyists are restricted to gifts of \$50 per month per senator, but that figure does not include meals and beverages.

Food and drinks are reported under the heading of entertainment, and lobbyists spent \$371,000 on the category in 2015.

The only gifts that Gould was able to track are football tickets that the University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers to state senators. Eleven senators accepted the tickets, valued at \$798 per pair, in 2015. Another six senators purchased the tickets using campaign donations.

Gould also argued that state senators should be paid more than their \$12,000 annual salaries.

“It’s ironic that ‘we the people’ provide so little for our lawmakers while special interests are willing to spend so much,” he said in his report.

Mueller, the lobbyist, does not oppose more disclosure rules, but he said if people think lobbyists are paying cash to senators, they’re wrong. The most common gifts are golf green fees and flowers for weddings or funerals, he added.

“Every client I have is a matter of public record, and what they pay me is a matter of public record,” Mueller said. “And I think that’s good public policy.”