

# Students get an education on power of Capitol lobbyists

## HIGHLIGHTS

Law students wrote bill to require disclosure by lobbyists who seek to influence state contracts

Measure passed Assembly but faces uphill battle in Senate

State awarded more than \$12 billion in contracts last year that would be covered by bill





BY ALEX KHAN  
AND ROBERT NASH  
*Special to The Bee*

Upon first hearing about Assembly Bill 1200, it's quite understandable that so many Californians wonder why we don't already have the law on the books.

This is a state that prides itself on open government and where more than four decades ago, voters approved the California Political Reform Act that sought to restrict lobbyists from improperly influencing lawmakers by creating a system of reporting and oversight.

But that law doesn't extend to consultants who represent contractors seeking to procure state business. AB 1200, which goes before the Senate Appropriations Committee as soon as Thursday, seeks to close that loophole.

We are students at McGeorge School of Law who, as part of the legislative and public policy clinic, wrote AB 1200. We set out to write a bill that would be important to California and its citizens. We have received quite an education.

The Assembly approved the measure by a 79-0 vote, but it still faces a David vs. Goliath battle in the Senate.

People who trade on influence and inside knowledge prefer to remain in the shadows. They don't want to comply with AB 1200's provisions that would require them to disclose details about their activity, how much they are paid and who is paying them.

Specifically, AB 1200 would expand the definition of lobbying under the Political Reform Act to include those who go to state agencies seeking to obtain contracts for their clients. The 1974 act already requires people who lobby legislators and other regulatory bodies to report their activities. It's just common sense that people who seek direct monetary benefits for their clients should also report their lobbying activities.

Last year, California awarded more than \$12 billion in contracts that would fall under this bill. The public deserves to know who made efforts to influence those contracts, how much they were paid, and for whom they were working.

California used to be a leader in political reform, but we have fallen behind 26 other states and the federal government, which already require the reporting under AB 1200. When Texas has regulations more progressive than California, it's time for our Legislature and this state's political reformers to look in the mirror.

Our experience with this bill has been both encouraging and, at times, disheartening.

We've seen great political courage, like when Assemblyman Richard Gordon, D-San Mateo, agreed to carry our bill. In an early meeting, he made it clear that he would carry the bill if it made sound public policy and was good for California, without regard for what the K Street crowd would say. We were pleased when Republican Assemblywoman Shannon Grove of Bakersfield praised our bill on the Assembly floor and encouraged other Republicans to vote "aye."

But the California Fair Political Practices Commission dealt AB 1200 a blow when its projected fiscal impact far exceeded the likely cost. Yet even at the FPPC's estimated \$500,000, the cost is miniscule compared to the \$2.5 million earmarked in the state budget to renovate the Governor's Mansion, or \$2.7 million for a swimming pool in Calexico - in the middle of a record drought.

If AB 1200 eventually reaches his desk, we hope Gov. Jerry Brown will seize the opportunity to bring greater sunshine to the state procurement process. Californians deserve to know that their tax dollars are being spent in a fair and effective manner.

Our year-long efforts advocating this bill have been quite a learning experience. In the next few weeks, we will see if the good guys can still triumph in today's political system.

*Alex Khan and Robert Nash are students at McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento.*