

October 24, 2024

Minnesota Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board
190 Centennial Office Building
658 Cedar Street
St. Paul, MN 55155

Re: Lobbying Definitions Study

Dear Members of the Campaign Finance Board,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on proposed changes to add transparency to the process of lobbying of state & local officials. I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota, however these comments are my own. From 2009 - 2021; I served on the Rochester City Council. In that environment I saw pressure placed on myself and my peers by individuals paid to influence policy and decisions related to the billions of dollars spent by local governments in the state of Minnesota. Most of the contact I and my peers had with paid lobbyists or their surrogates were outside of public meetings. This is why strong disclosure standards are so important.

Based on my own experiences I would encourage the state to enact a broad definition of lobbying that includes all individuals who are paid entirely or in part to engage with individual elected officials, professional staff, advisory boards or full elected bodies. Further this definition should be extended to paid individuals who organize unpaid individuals to lobby on behalf of their cause.

In the case of the Rochester City Council, we were often lobbied by the Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce, Rochester Area Builders Association, Southeastern Minnesota Association of Realtors, and Sierra Club among others. In some cases I agreed with these groups, others I did not. But in all cases, the public deserves to know who was lobbying the City of Rochester.

I would urge the board not to carve out any exceptions for individual professions or individual parts of the governing processes. In local government the application of policies (quasi-judicial) by appointed bodies, elected bodies, and professional staff is as important as the creation of policy itself. Disclosure of lobbying activities is not a high bar and is a fair expectation for people paid even a de minimis amount for direct or indirect lobbying.

A lobbyist is not a bad person and many times their intentions may be noble. Irrespective of the person or the cause; no one should be allowed to lobby without the sunlight of disclosure. Disclosure is particularly important when lobbying happens in front of government bodies where little or no media may be present. This is certainly the case with most local governments.

In closing, I would ask the board to ensure all those paid to influence local and state governments can do so, but only with the sunlight of disclosure.

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