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**Lobbying dipped $6.1M in 2019-20 session, but not just from COVID-19**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Lobbying efforts took a big hit last session as the COVID-19 pandemic raged, but a WisPolitics.com review found that, in many ways, the influence industry is still alive and well.

According to Ethics Commission data, groups spent $64 million to lobby the Capitol during the 2019-20 session, a $6.1 million drop from the previous two-year period.

Many groups told WisPolitics.com that coronavirus played a significant role in the decline. Gov. Tony Evers closed the Capitol to the public, and many lawmakers and state agencies switched to entirely virtual communications.

Mike Marsch, legislative director for Wisconsin Property Taxpayers, said Democratic lawmakers had been especially difficult to contact and the group’s grassroots lobbying efforts effectively shut down for two months last year in the depths of the pandemic.

The organization spent $580,543 last session, a $318,436 drop compared to 2017-18.

But despite the dip, Marsch said his organization had actually done more work in 2020 than ever before. It’s just that the switch to mostly virtual lobbying affected how the commission logs the work. Phone calls and virtual meetings tend to take up less time and thus cost less.

“We actually put more time and effort into our legislative agenda this year than we probably have in the last five years,” Marsch said. “But because of the opportunity to sit down and have discussions were so much different and challenging, it didn’t amount to the same kind of hour commitment that we’ve seen in the past.”

But COVID isn’t entirely to blame for the multimillion-dollar dip in lobbying.

One big example: Marsy’s Law Wisconsin spent nearly $1.2 million over 2017-18 and only $384,479 last session. Logs indicate all its 2019-20 spending happened in the first six months of 2019.

Lawmakers that year passed the joint resolution for a second consecutive session and turned it over to the voters. Wisconsinites in the 2020 spring election passed the amendment with overwhelming support, establishing a crime victim’s bill of rights in the state.

Another group whose spending declined was the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, which spent $859,037 last session, $153,862 less than it did in 2017-18. But Karen Gefvert, the bureau’s executive director of government relations, said her organization logged fewer dollars over the session only because it reorganized how it conducts lobbying efforts.

She did say the pandemic clearly had an effect on lobbying as lawmakers for the most part didn’t meet in 2020. But she attributed most of the difference to a 2019 staffing change and not the virus.

While total spending on lobbying dipped by the millions, many of the state’s largest groups actually saw their logged spending increase over the past session, rather than decrease.

For example, Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce spent the most out of any group in 2019-20 with $1.5 million. And that number is actually up $157,635 compared to its numbers in 2017-18, when it also spent the most.

Scott Manley, executive vice president of government relations, toldWisPolitics.com the two biggest factors this past session were budget talks at the start of 2019 and then, of course, COVID-19.

“It really dominated our calendar year in 2020,” he said.

While some organizations said the virtual switch made lobbying efforts more difficult, Manley said it in some respects “really simplified” the process of meeting with policymakers and executive agencies.

Before, WMC had to wait until lawmakers were in town in order to have a meeting, he said. And even then, lobbyists would wait in the Capitol or struggle to align their calendars. Nowadays, most work happens over the phone or online, and Manley doesn’t see that changing anytime soon.

But again, not all spending changes happened because of the pandemic, lobbyists say.

The Wisconsin State Bar increased its lobbying efforts in 2019-20 by$156,086 when compared to 2017-18. Lisa Roys, director of advocacy and access to justice, told WisPolitics.com the organization spent more because it added a fourth registered lobbyist to its pool: a new grassroots coordinator.

“We were busy and we’ve kept busy, but a lot of it has to do with keeping our members engaged,” Roys said.

Top spenders in the 2019-20 session included: WMC at $1.5 million; theWisconsin Hospital Association at $1.3 million; The Wisconsin Realtors Association at $1 million; the Wisconsin Credit Union League at $928,074; the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation at $859,037; the Wisconsin Insurance Alliance at $833,126; Wisconsin Infrastructure Investment Now at $708,325; State Bar of Wisconsin at $678,649; Wisconsin Counties Association at $674,081; and Wisconsin Automobile and Truck Dealers Association at $601,737.

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