

Los Angeles Times

Sunday, February 11, 2001

Some Who Lobby Politicians Also Run Their Campaigns

❖ **Ethics:** Watchdog groups say the dual roles, which have become commonplace at City Hall, enable consultants to 'wield undue influence.' Officials defend the arrangements.

As city commissioners recently debated whether to award the lucrative Greek Theatre contract to House of Blues Concerts Inc., one of the firm's top lobbyists, Steve Afriat, listened in via speaker from the comfortable office of City Councilwoman Laura Chick, the firm's chief council backer.

Few at Los Angeles City Hall would be surprised that Afriat enjoyed the insider accommodations: In addition to serving as a lobbyist for clients seeking Chick's favor, Afriat is the political consultant running Chick's campaign for city controller.

Afriat is not alone in enjoying special ties to the council members he lobbies. Another House of Blues lobbyist, Rick Taylor, listened to part of the Greek Theatre hearing with Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski in her office. Taylor is campaign consultant for Miscikowski's reelection campaign, and he was the political strategist who helped Councilman Alex Padilla get elected in 1999.

Such incestuous political relationships are commonplace at City Hall, where two-thirds of the City Council members have, at one time or another, hired lobbyists who also want their votes.

In one high-profile battle – the pitched contest between House of Blues and Nederlander-Greek Inc. over control of the Greek – seven of the 14 City Council members likely to

By Patrick McGreevy, *Staff Writer*

vote on the matter have at some point hired for political work the same lobbyists whose clients are bidding on the contract. Most of those lobbyists represent the House of Blues, which is seeking to wrest the contract from Nederlander-Greek.

The proliferation of lobbyists who double as paid political advisors has alarmed many political watchdog groups and ethics experts.

"The problem, obviously, is that lobbyists are able to wield undue influence when they leverage their position as campaign consultants with those they lobby," said Jim Knox, executive director of California Common Cause. "It's a conflict. It's not appropriate."

The lobbyists and elected officials defend the arrangements, saying they can keep their relationships as lobbyists and lobbied separate from their roles as advisors and politicians.

"It's a business relationship. You are paying for someone to run your campaign," Chick said of her hiring of Afriat. "For 7½ years, I have based my decisions on the merits. If I based my decisions on who I know, it would be impossible. I have a variety of friends on both sides of many issues."

Afriat agreed.

Afriat has received more than \$31,000 from Chick's campaign for controller. He also has worked as a paid political consultant for Councilman Mike Hernandez and was paid fund-raiser for Councilman Rudy Svorinich Jr.

Taylor, whose other lobbying clients include the J. Paul Getty Trust, City Cab Co. and American Golf Inc., also insisted that there is no conflict between lobbying and consulting. "The last person the candidates owe a favor is the campaign consultant, because they pay us for our services," he said.

But the benefits to lobbyists of such relationships were bluntly advertised in a mailer Afriat's firm sent to prospective lobbying clients three years ago. "The secret of Afriat's success is the political consulting arm of our firm – we represent elected officials in fundraising and campaign management," the mailer boasted.

Experts Troubled by Appearance of Conflict

City rules require disclosure of such interlinking relationships but do not prohibit them. Both Afriat and Taylor openly acknowledged that they had listened to the Recreation and Parks Commission meeting about the Greek Theatre in the council members' offices.

The relationships are not limited to officeholders; candidates in the April City Council elections also have hired registered city lobbyists to help run their campaigns.

Bob Stern, who coauthored the state's 1974 Political Reform Act, said the city Ethics Commission should consider regulating the practice.

"I find it very troubling," Stern said. "Clearly, it gives the lobbyist tremendous access that the average person does not have."

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Even some lobbyists say the dual role is cause for concern.

“I personally think it’s a conflict,” said Arnie Berghoff, whose clients include Browning-Ferris Industries, the operator of Sunshine Canyon Landfill – the council considered the landfill’s expansion last year. “When you run someone’s campaign, it creates a completely different relationship.” The public perceives that this kind of conduct is wrong, he said.

Veteran lobbyist and campaign consultant Harvey Englander does not believe working on a council member’s election campaign gives a lobbyist undue influence, but he acknowledged that the perception exists, and that alone can boost business for the lobbyists.

“It certainly helps, because people believe, whether rightly or wrongly, that you have a special relationship with the elected official,” Englander said. “I don’t know if it is special, but you do have a relationship of trust.”

Englander’s role as Councilman Hal Bernson’s longtime political advisor might seem advantageous for the lobbyist, because Bernson heads the council’s powerful Planning and Land Use Management Committee, a key panel soon to take up an ordinance regulating large stores, including Kmart, an Englander client.

Bernson denied that he gives Englander any special favors just

because the lobbyist is partly responsible for his job on the council.

Padilla, the councilman from Pacoima, offered the same defense of his relationship with lobbyist James Acevedo. After helping Padilla win election in 1999 as a paid political operative, Acevedo registered as a lobbyist for those seeking open Internet access for cable franchises. Padilla by that time had been named chairman of the council panel considering the issue, and later came out in favor of open access. He denied he was influenced by Acevedo’s political work.

“He is an advisor, and he is a friend,” Padilla said of Acevedo. “But when it comes to him having personal financial interests or dealings with the city, he does not get any special treatment.”

Lobbyists’ Access a Selling Point

In all, more than a dozen City Hall lobbyists have doubled as political operatives for elected officials.

As his firm’s mailer indicated, Afriat has made a point of letting potential lobbying clients know of his political work for council members, and in the process his firm has become one of the top lobbying firms working City Hall. From 24 clients six years ago, it jumped to 72 last year, according to reports filed with the city Ethics Commission. The

company’s revenue has grown from about \$20,000 to \$97,000 per month.

A Sherman Oaks resident who served until a year ago as president of the city Animal Regulation Commission, Afriat has frequently represented development clients in lobbying the Planning and Land Use Management Committee, where two of the three members – Hernandez and Miscikowski – have been political clients.

Afriat’s personal lobbying in the Greek Theatre matter included arranging and attending a meeting two months ago between Chick and Adam Friedman, a senior vice president for House of Blues. The meeting took place in the councilwoman’s office.

Chick said she also met with representatives of and lobbyists for competing firms before she testified last month in favor of House of Blues.

Chick said her support for House of Blues is based on the millions of additional dollars the company brings to the city, not on the company’s lobbyist. House of Blues has offered to make \$11.1 million in capital improvements to the city-owned entertainment center, more than double the \$5.5 million offered by Nederlander-Greek.

“I believe House of Blues would provide a better deal,” Chick said. “It’s about merit. There are millions of dollars more on the table for the city.”



The Argonaut

Monday, August 30, 2001

Los Angeles:

Galanter picks Afriat for panel

Los Angeles Councilwoman Ruth Galanter appointed political consultant Steve Afriat to the City of Los Angeles Redistricting Commission, which was created by the voter-approved city charter in 1999.

The commission is charged with advising the Los Angeles City Council on new council district boundaries required after the 2000 Census.

“Afriat has experience in reapportionment, election legislation and the state elections code,” Galanter said