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**Pols' meal ticket; How lobbyists feed legislators**

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SPRINGFIELD-In a town where there is a $ 34 billion-plus state budget and campaign contributions routinely arrive $ 10,000 at a time, $ 148,000 might not seem like a lot of money.

Until one considers how many steak dinners and after-hours cocktails that last amount bought state lawmakers last year.

A Chicago Sun-Times analysis of 4,100 newly logged lobbyist expenditures from 1997 found one legislator who accepted more than $ 3,000 in free food and drinks from special interests.

Another 10 lawmakers exceeded $ 2,000. And 30 others allowed $ 1,000 or more of their dining and drinking expenses to be covered by lobbying groups or corporations with agendas in Springfield.

There is nothing at all illegal about this, nor is there any rule against it.

However, "the perception is definitely not good," as Gov. Edgar put it when told of the findings.

"I think that does raise some question that could leave a very negative impression on the part of the citizens of this state," Edgar said.

One cause for concern is that the legislators who are receiving the free food and drink also are billing taxpayers to the tune of $ 83 a day for meals and lodging whenever the Legislature is in session.

Last year, that amount totaled $ 1.08 million.

Because of the sheer volume, rarely do the meals and beverages that are bought for lawmakers undergo much scrutiny whenever lobbyists file their annual expenditure reports with the state each February.

But this year, the focus is on all the free food, drinks and entertainment in the Legislature. Edgar and House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) say they intend in the coming weeks to push measures designed to sharply curtail, if not eliminate, legislative wining and dining.

To some, generosity by lobbying groups has its place in state government.

After all, in the business world, taking out a client for dinner often is how a deal takes shape or gets struck.

"This is our culture," said prominent lobbyist Gene Hoffman, a former GOP assistant House minority leader from Elmhurst and partner in the Hoffman-McPike and Associates lobbying firm.

Jim Howard, executive director of the government watchdog group Illinois Common Cause, disagrees. "What in the hell are we doing giving them an $ 83 per diem, allowing their personal use of campaign cash, and then leaving this aspect of interference in public policy unchecked?" Howard asked.

"This is what I consider to be the obscene side of what goes on under the dome," Howard said of the political access that lobbyists get through the wining and dining of legislators.

Illinois is among 20 states without limits on lobbyist gift-giving. In a majority of states, the meals and other gratuities that are commonplace here would be greatly restricted or not allowed at all. In Wisconsin and Massachusetts, for example, the law does not even permit a lobbyist to purchase a cup of coffee for a lawmaker.

"Illinois is out of step with the rest of the nation on this," said John Cameron, executive director of another watchdog group in favor of restrictions, Citizen Action of Illinois.

Last year, Rep. Kurt Granberg (D-Carlyle) accepted $ 3,016 from special interests for free food, beverages and entertainment. That was more than anyone else and an amount six times the legislative average, records showed.

Granberg, an assistant House majority leader and an architect of last year's electric deregulation effort, accepted nearly $ 890 in free meals and beverages from the Awerkamp and McClain lobbying firm and another $ 764 from Hoffman-McPike and Associates.

Awerkamp's clients include Commonwealth Edison, while Hoffman-McPike represents Illinois Power Co., both of whom were big players allied in the deregulation push.

"I don't find any problem with it as long as there is absolute disclosure," Granberg said of the drinks and meals he accepted. "If somebody thinks they're going to influence me by buying my lunch, that would be absurd."

Rep. Angelo "Skip" Saviano (R-Elmwood Park), who ranked fourth among all lawmakers for the free meals and drinks he accepted, defended after-hours meetings with lobbyists as an important way to stay abreast of issues.

Moreover, he said, the lobbyist reports give a distorted picture of late-night life in the capital. Not only do they fail to show the occasions when a lawmaker picks up the tab for a lobbyist's meal -- Saviano says he buys as often as he receives -- they make it look as if legislators never know when to say no, he said.

"If I went out to lunch with everyone that asked me, I'd weigh 10,000 pounds. I've got a big enough belly the way it is," said Saviano, who accepted $ 2,604 in free meals, drinks and entertainment.

The single largest buyer of individual meals and drinks for lawmakers was Ameritech, which reported $ 10,104 in such expenditures. Next came the Illinois Bankers Association, and third was Hoffman-McPike.

There are a number of lawmakers deeply disturbed by offers of a complimentary lunch at nearly every turn. Some have absolute prohibitions against it, though they are a true minority in the Statehouse.

"You could go out every night if you wanted to, and every lunch. And I imagine some people do. But they have to answer for themselves. For me, I've just tried to stay free of that whole game," said Rep. Thomas Johnson (R-West Chicago), who accepted a comparatively meager $ 88 in meals.

"I try to avoid being paid for by political action groups. It keeps me fairly independent. I like all the lobbyists. But this way, I get to argue with them."