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Cashing in on contacts

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As Mississippi's community mental health centers sought \$22 million this year, Billy Thames, a former state senator-turned-lobbyist, called the man who controls the House purse strings.

Mental health officials said Thames' efforts led to quick approval of \$20 million in House Appropriations Committee Chairman Johnny Stringer's committee, followed by support on the House floor.

Stringer said he backed the bill in order to prevent a hike in ad valorem taxes, which also fund the centers. Mental health officials said Thames' longtime friendship with the chairman didn't hurt their attempts to save 15 centers in jeopardy.

Thames, who retired in 2007 from a 28-year Senate career, is among a growing list of former legislators and other public officials trying to influence their former colleagues at the Capitol. Some earn hundreds of thousands of dollars lobbying.

Lobbyists who did not serve in office have earned more, according to state lobbying records.

Of Mississippi's 443 registered lobbyists, Clare Hester of Capitol Resources cleared the most in 2007 at \$1.67 million.

Her firm represented a tobacco company, pharmacies and casinos, among others.

Former state Sen. Gloria Williamson, who lost a re-election bid last year, registered to lobby this year along with former state Sen. Barbara Blackmon. Also, among the new lobbyists is former Insurance Commissioner George Dale, who was defeated in last August's Democratic primary. He is a registered lobbyist working on insurance issues for a law firm.

The ex-public officials said their new careers allow them to stay involved in public service while earning much more than they did as elected officials.

Their knowledge of the complex legislative process, as well as the relationships they have forged, make them attractive to clients.

But political watchdogs said Mississippi's lack of a "cooling-off" period allows former legislators to quickly profit off their contacts and could help special-interest groups influence decisions. Half of the 50 states have some type of restrictions, said Craig Holman, a campaign finance lobbyist for national watchdog group Public Citizen.

Unlike federal law, Mississippi allows legislators to lobby immediately after leaving office. A bill that would have forced former lawmakers to wait four years before lobbying died this session.

"The (goal) is to capture at least a full legislative session so former lawmakers cannot cash in on their networks," Holman said. "Not only can (ex-lawmakers) leverage more influence, there's a sense of loyalty.

"You also know what appeals to your former colleagues."

But Thames asked, "How long should a person be penalized because they have been a public servant?"

State ethics laws prohibit legislators from lobbying for state agencies for a year after they leave office.

Thames lobbies for an association of community mental health centers.

A recent opinion issued by the state Ethics Commission allows him to lobby for the centers if the money he receives is from the federal government or private sources. Department of Mental Health Director Ed LeGrand said Thames is paid with private funds. He also represents Mississippi One-Call System Inc., a company that links operators of underground facilities and excavators.

"We can continue to (help people) and do it in a more effective manner, I don't see a thing wrong with it," he added.

Lobbying is a full-time job during the legislative session, which usually begins in January and ends in April. Often, lobbyists talk with lawmakers at the Capitol during the day and treat them to dinner and drinks at night.

At least 18 other registered lobbyists are past lawmakers, including former House Speaker Tim Ford and former Lt. Gov. Brad Dye. Others, including former state Sen. Ben Stone, are attorneys for powerful clients seeking legislation that affects Mississippians.

Stone, who cites his "close ties with legislators" on law firm Balch & Bingham's Web site, represents Mississippi Power. Ford, who touts "a unique relationship with present and former state officials across the country," works for the same firm. He does not list Mississippi Power as a client.

Mississippi Power, Entergy and other groups have employed dozens of lobbyists to push legislation this session that could eventually allow the companies to raise customers' rates before building additional plants.

Stone was present when a House committee approved the legislation. The House bill died before reaching the House floor, but a similar Senate bill is still alive.

Former state Sen. Crowell Armstrong earned \$309,000 in 2007, the most among ex-lawmakers now lobbying. He represented clients including AT&T Services, the University of Mississippi, Northrop Grumman, the city of Natchez, Motorola and Electric Power Associations.

Former state Rep. Willie Bozeman made \$149,453 last year. The state Trial Lawyers Association and Harrah's Operating Co. were among his clients.

Williamson said many legislators "wait for lobbyists to tell them about particular bills instead of studying (bills) themselves."

As a lawmaker, she said she was quick to make decisions, so "most lobbyists knew they may as well not talk to me."

"So now, I respect when (a lawmaker) says, 'I can't help you with that,'" said Williamson, who along with Blackmon represents the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and the city of Canton.

Stringer, D-Montrose, said, "We've all got friends, but we have to say no on some projects, no matter how close of friends they are."

In the U.S. House of Representatives, lawmakers are prohibited from lobbying for one year after they leave office.

Former Sen. Trent Lott retired weeks before a U.S. Senate rule kicked in that requires lawmakers to wait two years before lobbying. Lott then formed a lobbying firm.

A bill introduced in the state House that would have required a four-year "cooling-off period" died when House Judiciary A Committee Chairman Ed Blackmon chose not to bring it up for discussion.

State Rep. Hank Zuber said he authored the legislation because former lawmakers "could take advantage of personal relationships with other members."

"It may not be intentional," Zuber, R-Ocean Springs, said. "But it's only human nature to try to help people, if a friend comes to you and needs a bill to pass or die."

But Blackmon, a Democrat from Canton and the husband of Barbara Blackmon, said the length of time Zuber proposed was "arbitrary."

It wouldn't work in the Mississippi Legislature, he said, because "we have a 25 percent turnover every four years."

Blackmon said his wife was out of office for four years before she began lobbying this year, but "she still knows everybody."

Lobbying after lawmaking also could be a double-edged sword for politicians who crossed each other while in office, he added.

"Better be careful," he said. "There are some fresh memories here."