

Legislators benefiting from free travel

Watchdogs concerned over potential conflicts of interest

BY ELIZABETH CRISP

State legislators have spent considerable time in Baton Rouge with seven sessions over the past year and a half. But lawmakers also have benefited from thousands of dollars' worth of free trips across the country in that time.

A review by The Advocate of disclosure documents found state lawmakers have accepted complimentary hotel stays, travel and conference admissions valued at more than \$73,000 combined since the new Legislature took office in January 2016. The trips, which do not face the same caps that limit gifts from lobbyists, are reflected in signed affidavits that lawmakers must file with the state Board of Ethics within 60 days of traveling for free to conferences and seminars or to give speeches to sponsoring groups.

Some government watchdogs question whether special interests use the trips as a way to win face time and curry favor with lawmakers often at beach-side locales or in major cities; legislators generally defend them as educational opportunities that save taxpayer money.

Burdett Loomis, a University of Kansas political science professor who studies special interests and state legislatures, said lawmakers may benefit from the experts they meet when they attend conferences or from learning about other states, but he said the optics aren't always great if someone else is footing the bill.

"If this is something that if the state Legislature deems worthwhile, then the Legislature itself could pay for the trips," Loomis said. "That (way) there is never a question of conflict of interest."

Trips for Louisiana legislators over the past year were often comped by groups that identify as nonpartisan, but records show some also accepted complimentary travel from groups that overtly advocate on behalf of certain positions or were backed by wealthy corporations.

The Foundation for Excellence in Education, which was founded by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and pushes state policies favorable to charter schools and voucher programs, covered \$19,000 in complimentary travel for 13 Louisiana lawmakers to attend an education conference

last fall and stay in downtown Washington, D.C.'s Marriott Marquis hotel for two nights. The Foundation for Excellence comped more travel for legislators than any other group during the time period that was reviewed.

The nonpartisan National Conference of State Legislatures gifted legislators with 13 complimentary trips, including events focused on technology, taxes, health care and solar energy, for a combined \$13,180. The group relies on funding through sponsorships that it advertises as granting sponsors "opportunities to meet face-to-face with policymakers."

The Southern Regional Education Board, a nonpartisan group made up of state leaders to advise Louisiana and 15 other states on education policy, paid for 12 trips, which included admissions to its annual meeting held in New Orleans in June. The value of the board-backed trips was \$9,314.

House Speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia, has accepted complimentary trips to Southern California, Boston, the Alabama Gulf Coast and Vermont. At six trips reported, Barras was tied with state Rep. Pat Smith, DBaton Rouge, as taking the most complimentary travels.

Barras did not respond to requests for comment.

In his most recently reported trip, Barras disclosed that the Louisiana Chemical Association and the Louisiana Mid-Content Oil and Gas Association had paid \$209 for his lodging when he spoke at a meeting at the Grand Hotel Marriot in Point Clear, Alabama, last month.

Two of his trips were paid for by the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that provides training programs for legislative leaders. The foundation is funded by corporations, and on its website, the organization promises donors opportunities to "interact with state legislative leaders in the classroom, and in various social and cultural settings."

Loomis said specifically singling out legislative leaders, rather than more broad-ranging events, can give even more access to would-be influencers.

"What they get is unbridled access to legislative leaders, and that's very valuable given how much power, particularly the top leaders in the Legislature have," he said. "If you do follow the money, people are making investments here, and they probably expect some kind of

return, instead of just well-educated leaders."

Before becoming speaker, Barras disclosed just one such trip in 2013 when he accepted lodging and travel valued at \$1,243.60 to attend the National Conference of State Legislators event in Washington, D.C.

Officials are required by state law to file the affidavits within 60 days of any speech, educational trip or conference for which they accepted complimentary admission, lodging or transportation. There may have been trips in the past two months that didn't show up in The Advocate's review because the affidavits have yet to be filed.

"I think it's always worth being suspicious when people are having trips paid for," Loomis said. "You have groups organize or pay for trips and, even if it's not a real conflict of interest, certainly it's the appearance of a conflict of interest."

"Legislatures are notoriously ill-regarded, so I'm not sure this does legislators any favors," he added.

Senate President John Alario, R-Westwego, did not report accepting any complimentary trips. His campaign finance records show he dipped into his campaign account to pay for several trips for leadership summits in the past year, including those hosted by the State Legislative Leaders Foundation.

State Rep. Julie Stokes, R-Kenner, was the legislator who reported the highest value in complimentary trips since the new Legislature was sworn in, at \$4,778.

She said accepting travel scholarships helps legislators learn about key policy issues. She said she also has paid out of pocket to attend conferences.

"This is a benefit to everybody in Louisiana that I've been lucky enough to get these scholarships to better do my job as a legislator," Stokes said. "The state's not paying for this. It's good education and saving the taxpayers a lot of money."

Two of Stokes' trips were for the National Conference of State Legislators' task force on state and local taxation. Stokes, an accountant, has been a vocal advocate for tax policy changes.

"Everything that I've learned that would help us move from 50th in sales tax to something better, I've learned there," she said.

Three legislators - Sens. Page Cortez and Jonathan Perry and Rep. Chad Brown - last year attended a National Conference of State Legislators event on wireless communications in Las Vegas last year. The organization covered their stay at the Wynn casino on the Las Vegas Strip.

Cortez, R-Lafayette, said the event was sponsored by communications companies who hoped to pitch legislators on the latest technology and legislation they may need for emerging technologies to be in compliance with state and federal laws.

"It was an instructional information session on what could you see and what states are currently implementing," Cortez said. "I don't think that there was a favor being asked. It was simply an educational opportunity to learn the upsides and the downsides."

Because of the trip, Cortez said he feels better equipped to deal with issues involving evolving technologies and educate his colleagues.

"As a legislator, when issues like this come up, to be able to be briefed on it and understand it is very, very helpful," Cortez said. "It's continuing education."