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Chuck Sweeny: This is why Rockford needs its own lobbyist

Chuck Sweeny

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Is it wise for the city of Rockford to contract with Mike Cassidy and McGuireWoods, the firm for which he works, to lobby on behalf of Rockford in Springfield? Aldermen voted 13-1 Monday to pay \$10,000 for October. The total for the year: \$100,000, for 10 months of work.

I've been listening to people grumble about this: Why not have the aldermen lobby? Can't the mayor lobby? Isn't this what we have state senators and representatives for? Isn't there a lobbying firm in Rockford that could do the job? Isn't that Mike Dunn's job?

Well, aldermen do lobby. Every once in a while they trundle on down to Springfield on a bus and visit senators and representatives. Yes, the mayor lobbies. He goes to Springfield, has meetings and testifies before committees.

State senators and representatives also lobby, but let's say you're a Republican senator or representative, as all but one of our area legislators are. You're not going to get very far lobbying House Speaker Mike Madigan or Senate President John Cullerton, both Chicago Democrats, or Gov. Pat Quinn, another Chicago Democrat. Rockford's lone Democrat, Rep. Chuck Jefferson, has limited influence.

It's Dunn's job as local government coordinator to assemble coalitions built on local and regional goals, then meet with Cassidy, whose job it is to lobby for the local agenda in bill form under the Capitol dome. Dunn is not a registered lobbyist.

Coming down on a bus with 40 people doesn't impress anyone in the Statehouse because so many groups show up every day — you can't tell who's who. Are the people in the blue shirts from the Shelbyville Farm Bureau or the Rockford Chamber of Commerce? Oh, wait, they're the teachers from Carlinville. The Farm Bureau people are in the red shirts.

Obviously, this "Hey, we're here!" lobbying has a limited effect.

That's why Rockford has Cassidy, who used to work for the Speaker of the House and is intimately familiar with how the office works. Madigan is the most important and powerful man in Springfield — and has a special place in his heart for Rockford because it was home to one of his mentors, Rep. Zeke Giorgi.

Cassidy is a young guy who is everywhere in the Capitol building at the same time. I've never seen someone move so fast and be so informed about who's doing what to whom — legislatively, of course.

The last time I was in the Capitol, I had just gone through security when someone tapped me on my shoulder. I turned around. It was Cassidy. He told me what things of significance to Rockford were happening that day.

Good lobbyists have to be in the Capitol every day that lawmakers are in session. All day. They have to know what is happening in every committee room, every hearing, what legislation might come up and what might not. And yes, they have to go to Springfield bars and restaurants at night.

They also have to know how all the state departments work, and they have to know the key people in each one. They have to know how to influence the governor, or at least know how to read the Pat Quinn tea leaves. They also must work in tandem with other lobbyists promoting similar agendas. In our case, that means Cassidy will sometimes work with lobbyists from the Illinois Municipal League and with Kip Kolkmeier, Winnebago County's lobbyist.

Let's say Rockford wants its lobbyist to help the city get \$5 million for a capital project. The city also wants him to line up votes to pass two other bills favorable to the city's interests.

He may have to build a coalition with legislators from other cities and work with mayors and businesses who also want the bills passed. There may have to be trade-offs with certain lawmakers to get votes on particular bills.

Everything that happens in Springfield revolves around getting enough votes to pass something the governor will not veto. And that isn't easy.

In Illinois government, we have the infamous "shell bills" that are little more than a title. They may have language that can easily be stripped out and new language inserted while they move through the formal process of hearings, first readings, second readings, etc.

Lobbyists and lawmakers work to get certain language into these bills, often at the last minute, because the important bills typically hit the floor for final passage in the last few days or hours

of a legislative session. If you're not in the kitchen when the sausage is being made, your ingredients won't go into the final product. It's that simple.

And that's why Rockford hires a lobbyist. Just as other cities, counties, unions, business groups and utilities do.

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