

From the Atlanta Journal Constitution:

ETHICS WATCH

Gift cap senator courts donors

Planned fundraiser includes lobbyists who would face limits. Campaign donations ‘fundamentally different,’ he says.

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The top champion of capping lobbyists gifts at the statehouse is holding a campaign fundraiser four days before the start of the 2013 legislative session, seeking thousands of dollars from the people he’s trying to put the clamps on.

State Sen. Josh McKoon, R-Columbus, the legislative leader of an ethics reform coalition, sees campaign contributions as “fundamentally different” than the meals, drinks and ballgame tickets lobbyists typically supply. But some lobbyists aren’t buying that, especially since McKoon is asking for big money from them just before the General Assembly begins considering his proposed \$100 gift limit.

The fundraiser invitation describes contribution “levels” up to \$2,500, but it notes that donors can actually give twice as much — \$2,500 for the primary election campaign and \$2,500 for the general election.

“Can you please explain to me how you won’t take \$100 (in gifts), but you’ll take \$5,000?” asked Wayne Garner, who lobbies for, among others, banking and health care interests.

McKoon responded, “A campaign contribution assists me in delivering a political message to my constituents. A gift is something I consume for my own gratification and I think those are two different things.”

He also noted that campaign contributions — unlike gifts — are banned during legislative sessions, and that there are some limits on how much donors can contribute. There is currently no limit on gifts lobbyists can give lawmakers. Lobbyists reported spending about \$1.8 million on gifts in 2011, the last full year for which records are available.

McKoon helps lead a diverse coalition of groups — from Common Cause Georgia to the Tea Party Patriots and Georgia Conservatives in Action — pushing for ethics reform and, specifically, a cap on lobbyists gifts. House Speaker David Ralston has countered McKoon by proposing a complete ban on lobbyist gifts.

The lobbyist gift issue is expected to be one of the hot topics of the 2013 session. Because state law bans legislators from collecting campaign contributions during the session, dozens of lawmakers typically hold fundraisers the week before each session. Lobbyists scurry from one event to the next to hand in last-minute checks.

McKoon’s fundraiser is scheduled for Jan 10 at the Buckhead Club in Atlanta. Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle and Senate President Pro-Tem-elect David Shafer are named on the invitation as “special guests.” Contribution “levels” are listed, ranging from \$250 to \$2,500.

Through the end of October — the last disclosures available — McKoon had raised \$34,000 this year, about \$20,000 from groups and companies with lobbyists at the statehouse.

William Perry of Common Cause Georgia, an ally of McKoon's on ethics, echoed the senator's sentiments that campaign contributions are different than dinners, drinks and ballgame tickets.

"The difference is that campaign contributions are regulated and, more importantly, limited," Perry said. "Campaign contributions are more an expression of political will.

"Sure, they are meant to influence, but they are controlled in that they can't happen during the session," he added. "You can't specifically give a campaign contribution and say 'we want you to support X, or it's bribery and you can go to jail. I feel better about campaign contributions than lobbyist gifts, which are both unlimited and can happen at any point... moments before a vote."

Jet Toney, a veteran lobbyist who chairs the Georgia Professional Lobbyists Association, said his group has been told that in states where there are restrictions on gifts, "increased pressure has been placed by elected officials and political parties on lobbyists to increase the amount of political contributions ."

McKoon said if that happens in Georgia, the money will be given to campaigns when lawmakers are not in session. The senator said he would consider that "a huge step forward for ethical government in our state."

But Toney argues that the pre-session fund raising "speaks to some inconsistencies in message. If the Legislature is going to look at lobbyist spending, why not look at campaign finance? It's a package." While Toney said he "respects the spirit" of McKoon's efforts, the senator shouldn't expect to see the lobbyist at his fundraiser. Toney has decided not to give pre-session contributions to any lawmaker after Jan. 1.

State Sen. Josh McKoon, R-Brunswick, favors a \$100 cap on lobbyists gifts.