

# Atlanta Forward

## What is Atlanta Forward?

Our region is an important part of a complex world. On these pages, we'll bring you a wide array of viewpoints and insights on the issues you've told us are most important to you. We're committed to bringing you smart work by some of the best thinkers in metro Atlanta and beyond. We want to involve you in the conversation, too, so let us know what you think.

## Today's moderator: Tom Sabulis

A 20-year veteran of the A.J.C., Tom Sabulis has covered news, politics, and the arts during a career that has taken him to newspapers across the country. Since 2008, he has coordinated many of the newspaper's pro/con debates and first-person guest columns.

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## FRIDAY CONVERSATION: QUALITY OF LIFE

Factions from across the political spectrum are urging a gift ban on Georgia legislators when they convene next month. Today, an Atlanta Tea Party member writes that outlawing gifts is a matter of trust, while a leader of a local professional lobbyist group says the real issue is all the unregistered lobbyists who are not required to disclose the various ways they entertain and influence lawmakers. (House Ethics Committee Chairman Joe Wilkinson declined an invitation to write for today's page.)

GUEST COLUMN

## Act on ethics reform soon

By Julianne Thompson

A county commissioner in Gwinnett County was recently sentenced to federal prison for accepting a bribe from a developer.

Another former commissioner was indicted on an accusation of accepting a bribe from a developer.

It has been widely publicized—and in some cases, flaunted—that special interests and developers shower some members of our commission with tickets to concerts and athletic events, entertain them in developers' private boxes and arena suites, and make sure their campaign coffers are ready to fend off any contender.

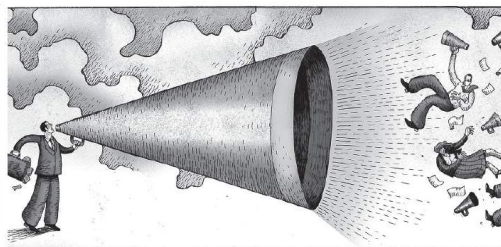
It is a recipe for destruction that has ended in Gwinnett citizens having zero trust in their commission.

The same practice of winning, dining and entertaining legislators runs rampant at the state Capitol, and many seem to have a sense of entitlement where this is concerned.

Yet, there are members of the Legislature who still buy into the old adage, "Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil," and that somehow, if you deny there is a problem long enough, it will no longer be a problem.

But Gwinnett is proof that these destructive behaviors not only lead to a complete lack of trust, but also to wrongdoing, and it is sheer naïveté to believe these things cannot and do not happen.

Last year at the annual Wild Hog Supper, the semi-annual start to the legislative session each year, it was disclosed that lobbyists paid \$7,677 on the event, yet the supper actually cost \$16,393. The rest



PHIL LACHINE/NEWSWART



Julianne Thompson is co-chairman of the Atlanta Tea Party.

was paid for by a "nonprofit" called "Friends of Agriculture." The board of that nonprofit is made up of some of the state's most powerful lobbyists. The only purpose of the "nonprofit" is to put on the Wild Hog Supper.

Last winter, when several of us interested in ethics reform met with officials, a former member of the Ethics Commission was present to give an argument against reform. When I questioned him about this, he told me that lobbyists came to the commission, and that the commission advised

them to form this "nonprofit" and report it this way.

My question to him was, "Are you telling me the Ethics Commission is advising lobbyists to be deceptive in reporting?" He didn't quite know how to continue his point at that time.

So much for the argument that if gifts are limited, only then will they go underground.

As a result of an ineffective and underfunded ethics commission, many have called for a complete revamping of the commission to give it more authority, or for a statewide grand jury to investigate and even issue indictments regarding allegations of corruption of elected officials on local and state levels, a model proposed more than two decades ago by then-Attorney General Mike Bowers.

In July, more than 82 percent of Georgia voters across party lines said the conflict and voted in favor of ending

the practice of unlimited gifts to legislators from lobbyists.

People do not trust their government, and ignoring those cries for reform will not make them go away.

The Senate has new leadership, and with that can come a renewal of commitment to the wishes of the electorate.

Open the lines of communication and begin a meaningful conversation on reform. It needs to be passed, and citizens lobbyists need to stand on equal footing with paid lobbyists.

The ball is now in the courts of new Senate President Pro Tem David Shafer and Speaker David Ralston.

We will be watching, and we are hopeful they will act by putting forth meaningful ethics reform and work with each other to see it passes both chambers and is signed into law by Gov. Deal.

## TOPIC SCHEDULE

Monday	Schools
Tuesday	Transportation
Wednesday	Regional economy
Thursday	Leadership
Friday	Quality of life

## READERS WRITE

### SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

#### Deaths invite scrutiny of Hollywood's role

The Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy has forced a needed review of our laws and regulations that contributed to the massacre. But let's make sure we don't stop with reviewing the Second Amendment. Lawmakers need to look at how Hollywood and the entertainment industry played a role in the tragedy. The gratuitous violence that is part of television, movies, video games and even some song lyrics is abominable.

Certainly, gun control deserves a close look, but let's also look at all of the contributing factors that are central to this tragedy: guns, mental health support and care, and the entertainment industry. The latter clearly cultivates seeds of violence in the young and impressionable—with little thought to the consequences.

STEPHANIE MOODY, JOHN'S CREEK

#### How can letter writer say Obama's faking?

Every morning for the last several days, I have gotten teary-eyed as I put my flag at half staff.

You can only imagine how I felt while reading the letter "Show of grief on TV was not convincing" (Readers write, Opinion, Dec. 19). To think that the author accuses the president of acting is unbelievable.

If I had to speak to a group of people, including parents, about the senseless murder of innocent children and teachers, I would completely lose it. This letter reveals not only a lack of empathy for the victims, but also a dislike of President Obama.

ODELL WIGMORES, MARIETTA

#### Times like these call for moral leadership

I've seen many an American flag at half staff in my city.

Perhaps we are too uncomfortable to admit that these flags also represent a nation of declining moral responsibility, that we may hold some blame for the Connecticut tragedy.

Such responsibilities are foundations to our society and cannot be legislated. Despite our accomplishments of freedom, heritage and strength, without basic moral leadership and direction, we are done for—as a society and a country.

E. MARTIN, PEACHTREE CITY

## GOVERNMENT

### Congress needs to get some fiscal discipline

Due to President Obama's inability to have any effect on this economy, my wife and I both lost our jobs, our house, one of our cars, and depleted all our savings trying to survive. We are now on a "fixed income," which required us to drastically cut our spending. We had to decide what was absolutely necessary—and what was not.

It is high time for Congress to do the same, and it is beyond time for the American public to tell Congress, "You are on a fixed income. There is no more credit and no additional money. What you are getting is all you are going to get from us." Maybe then, they will decide what is absolutely necessary spending—and what is not.

SHERARD S. AVERITT IV, CUMMING

Let us to the editor should be no longer than 150 words and must include a daytime phone number for verification. They may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in print or other formats. Email submissions are preferred.

Email: [letters@ajc.com](mailto:letters@ajc.com).

#### How to submit an Opinion

columns: Submissions should be 600 words or less. Email columns to Opinion Editor Tom Sabulis at [tsabulis@ajc.com](mailto:tsabulis@ajc.com). Columns submitted to the A.J.C. may be published, republished and made available in the A.J.C. or other databases and electronic formats.

GUEST COLUMN

## Blame unregistered lobbyists

By James E. "Jet" Toney

When the General Assembly convenes in January, state lawmakers will focus on ethics reform.

Many expect the legislature to pass a law to reduce lobbyist expenditures and restrict how lobbyists interact with elected officials.

Once the law becomes effective, registered lobbyists will comply.

But unregistered lobbyists will not.

As lawmakers consider the regulatory framework governing lobbyists' activities in 2013 and forward, perhaps the first step should be to more adequately define "influence" and to clarify the definition of who should register as a lobbyist.

The public and the media then will be better equipped to make more informed decisions regarding those elected to serve in state and local government.

Under Georgia's current ethics framework, individuals who are paid to promote or oppose state or local legislation, regulation or ordinance, and invest more than 10 percent of their time in such ad-



James E. "Jet" Toney is chairman of the Georgia Professional Lobbyists Association.

vocacy, are required to register as a lobbyist with the Georgia Transparency and Campaign Finance Commission (ethics commission).

Individuals who spend more than \$1,000 to influence public policy also must register.

Once registered, lobbyists must file frequent and comprehensive reports, which disclose what the lobbyist or his/her client has spent in the course of advocacy.

Under this regulatory framework, the public and the media have nearly immediate and convenient access to lobbyists' spending via the Internet.

Individuals who are conducting lobbying activities but who do not register with

the ethics commission are not subject to disclosure requirements.

Thus, Georgia citizens and media never know the activities of these unregistered lobbyists who may be entertaining elected officials, engineering substantial grassroots advocacy networks, or promoting business location or expansion in our state.

Currently, more than 1,200 people are registered with state ethics commission. Most file timely and complete reports disclosing their spending on elected officials, agency heads and key staff.

Those who fail to file timely reports are hit with significant fines that must be paid before they can register for the next legislative session.

Professional lobbyists pursue a reputation of honesty, integrity and reliability of information. Few risk the negative notoriety associated with compliance (ethics) problems.

Last year, several career lobbyists established the Georgia Professional Lobbyists Association (GPLA) with a mission to provide high-quality professional development training seminars for registered lobbyists, advocates for

underserved communities and other citizens who desire to more effectively communicate their causes to elected officials.

To date, the GPLA has provided more than 22 hours of professional education. Much of the content of GPLA seminars focuses on regulatory compliance and disclosure. Also, at least one hour of instruction at every seminar is provided by an expert on professional ethics or a former ethics regulator.

These ethicists help lobbyists protect their personal and professional image by demonstrating how to make sound behavioral and career choices in the turbulent environment of government and politics.

The public, media and lobbyists themselves benefit from knowing what registered lobbyists are spending as they represent their clients and their issues.

Georgia's current ethics framework provides a wealth of information to the public and the media about the activities and expenditures of registered lobbyists and their organizations. But it tells nothing of the influence of unregistered lobbyists.

