

The Buzz FEBRUARY 3, 2015

Missouri speaker bans lobbyist-funded meals in House committees

HIGHLIGHTS

With an ethics debate taking place in both legislative chambers, Missouri House Speaker John Diehl said Tuesday he was banning the practice of lobbyist-funded meals for committee hearings. Meanwhile, a state senator from St. Joseph has suggested a constitutional amendment to ban lobbyists' gifts.



BY JASON HANCOCK

The Star's Jefferson City correspondent

JEFFERSON CITY — Missouri House committee hearings will no longer include meals paid for by lobbyists, House Speaker John Diehl said Tuesday.

Diehl, a St. Louis County Republican, said that although there has been no formal change to House rules, he told committee chairmen to allow no more free food during meetings.

"The committee chairmen serve at my pleasure," he said, "so I have a feeling it will be followed."

The move shuts down a practice that has been a fixture of House committee hearings for years. And it happened amid renewed debate in both the state House and Senate over legislative ethics.

Missouri is the only state with no caps on campaign contributions, no limit on lobbyist gifts to elected officials and no restrictions on when a lawmaker can become a lobbyist.

Consequently, lobbyists doled out roughly \$9.7 million worth of gifts to Missouri elected officials over the last 10 years. In 2014 alone, lawmakers received more than \$893,000 worth of gifts, ranging from meals to event tickets to travel expenses.

And those dinners can get pricey. Last summer, five lawmakers racked up a \$3,000 tab at a Dallas steakhouse, with a dozen lobbyists splitting the bill.

If legislators were federal employees, they'd not be able to accept more than \$50 a year in gifts from somebody doing business with the government. Doing so could violate the federal bribery statute.

Diehl's decision also comes a week after he banned House committees from meeting outside the Capitol following public outcry over the House Telecommunications Committee holding a public meeting at the Jefferson City Country Club. At the meeting, lawmakers were filmed by a local TV station dining on a meal paid for by the Missouri Telecommunications Industry Association.

"The practice of lobbyists providing catered meals to committee members as they consider the fate of legislation sought by those same lobbyists has long left a foul taste in the mouths of many Missourians, and action to eliminate it is as welcome as it is overdue," said House Minority Leader Jacob Hummel, a St. Louis Democrat.

Legislators earn about \$35,000 a year for serving in the part-time legislature. They also get \$104 for every day the legislature is in session. Most lawmakers also hold down jobs in their districts.

On Tuesday, the Missouri Senate debated a bill sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Ron Richard, a Joplin Republican, that would mandate a two-year waiting period after leaving office before elected officials could become lobbyists, as well as a ban on elected officials acting as political consultants while in office, among other provisions.

Richard's bill does not place any limits on campaign contributions or lobbyists gifts. He vowed to fight off any amendments that tried to include those issues.

His warning didn't stop his colleagues from trying, however.

Sen. Jamilah Nasheed, a St. Louis Democrat, offered an amendment banning lawmakers from accepting travel or tickets to sporting events and concerts from lobbyists.

Nasheed said the practice of accepting pricey gifts from lobbyists must stop, in order to preserve public confidence in the political process.

"If my constituents don't have the ability to go to a St. Louis Rams (football) game for free," Nasheed said, "then why should legislators have that type of luxury?"

Sen. Bob Dixon, a Springfield Republican, said eliminating lobbyist gifts would take away a tool voters could use to judge their elected officials.

"With the freedom to do wrong, we have the opportunity to do what is right when no one is looking," he said. "That is what this great proving ground is about."

The amendment was eventually voted down, with only five Democrats and eight Republicans in favor. Among the proponents were three GOP 2016 statewide candidates — Sens. Will Kraus, Eric Schmitt and Kurt Schaefer. Kansas City's delegation split on the vote, with Democratic Sen. Jason Holsman in favor and Democratic Sen. Kiki Curls against.

Sen. Scott Sifton, a St. Louis County Democrat, went a step further than Nasheed. He offered an amendment banning all lobbyist gifts.

Sifton's amendment ultimately ended debate on the bill when Richard asked Senate President Pro Tem Tom Dempsey to rule it out of order, saying it was beyond the scope of the underlying bill. The Senate then set aside the bill for the day to give Dempsey time to decide.

A handful of other amendments were also filed and await debate, including one by Sen. David Pearce, a Warrensburg Republican, that would implement strict campaign finance limits. Richard has said he'd kill his own bill if contribution limits were included.

Sen. Rob Schaaf, a St. Joseph Republican, said he isn't confident any meaningful ethics reform legislation can win approval in the Missouri General Assembly. He's filed a proposed constitutional amendment that would, among other things, cap campaign contributions, ban lobbyists' gifts and prohibit contributions by unions and corporations.

But he expects it will take an initiative petition to place the issue on the ballot for voters to decide.

"In our state government, it is too often deep-pocketed special interests who set the agenda," Schaaf said.

Missouri politicians are "too busy trying to appease special interests that fund their political campaigns" to focus on issues that matter to everyday Missourians, he said.

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Kudos to Senator Rob Schaaf wanting to put contribution limits to a vote via Constitutional Amendment. That is the right idea. The will of the people would put an end to the out of control influence pedaling in Jefferson City.
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