



# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Sylvester Turner**

Mayor

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March 13, 2023

The Honorable Brian Hughes  
Chairman, Senate State Affairs Committee  
P.O. Box 2919  
Austin, TX 78768

Re: Senate Bill 175

Dear Chair Hughes and members of Senate Committee on State Affairs,

This is now my 4<sup>th</sup> time speaking in front of the Legislature against efforts to prohibit local governmental participation in the Legislative process.

I specifically use the term “participation” because I do believe that’s what this bill would eliminate.

This morning, the City of Houston is offering support for 3 bills in House Committee on Public Health on a sickle cell registry, recovery housing, and fentanyl legislation. At the exact same time in House Business & Industry, we are monitoring first responder illness and injury policy that directly impacts our city budgets. Starting at 10am, we supported legislation on affordable housing developments in House Ways & Means Committee, and later this afternoon we have 3 bills to support in the House Select Committee on Youth Health & Safety.

Our day is even busier on Tuesday.

This bill would bar the cities and counties from being able to hire the same assistance – and by that I mean lobbyists – that private businesses throughout the state hire to work with lawmakers on policies that impact their businesses.

With 22,000 employees, the City of Houston itself is a big employer. This bill would allow unions of those employee groups – as well as retiree groups – to continue to hire lobbyists to advocate for their interests but deny the ability of a city to do the same.

So what are we doing with our lobby teams during the Legislative Session?

Well, our Legislative Reports are easily accessible online and offer in great detail the City’s positions and testimonies to the Legislature on bills impacting City services. In fact, every piece of written testimony Houston has submitted to the Texas Legislature since 2021 is online – including a copy of these remarks.

This year we are focused on a series of public safety bills, and we are proud to work with a number of members including multiple members of this committee. These legislative

priorities are bipartisan, vetted by our Council Members, and help make needed changes to better serve the public. I would note that under Mayor Turner, we have put an added emphasis on advocating for increased access to mental health care which aligns with the State's leadership priorities. For that I am very thankful.

The primary organization that opposes the ability for cities to lobby is the Texas Public Policy Foundation who has become emboldened in their misinformation. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> they emailed out a statement condemning local lobbying efforts specifically saying, "Houstonians paid to advocate for . . . government-controlled health care."

That's a hell of a way to say we support for more state funding for mental health.

But that's not where their misinformation ends.

The numbers cited by the dark money group advocating for elimination of local participation uses information from an organization called, "Transparency USA." This group uses the ranges of dollar figures that the Texas Ethics Commission collects for lobbyists to try and calculate what local governments spend on lobbying.

In Houston's case, Transparency USA quadruple counted the amount paid to our prime lobby contractor making their final range report 2 to 4 times higher than what Houston actually spends. When alerted of this, the group refused to correct their information – despite being presented with the actual contract and Council approval.

For the record, Houston has a maximum spending limit of \$757,000 over a two-year period to pay for state lobby services – which is the same total it has been since 2011 and strikingly close to the one-year Major League Baseball rookie salary.

Our state lobby contract passed on a standalone, 16 to 1 vote and the only speaker that came to City Hall to discuss our lobby contract stated,

"I have second thoughts about eliminating taxpayer funded lobbying. It sounds like we get a lot of benefit from the money that we spend on that."

Mr. Douglas Smith – a longtime city budget observer and board member of the Houston Pachyderm Club – then invited me to speak to his group with a presentation on our state work.

Yes, I went to a local Republican club to talk about what our lobby team does and had a very productive dialogue with a number of folks.

But you are members of the Texas Senate State Affairs committee. You know that:

Local governments should have input on bills impacting city services.

Those impacts would affect local governments budget, policies, and ability to provide services.

We have a responsibility to be transparent and provide information on what we do – and I submit we very much do.

In full transparency, there are a number of bills on the calendar this week that would preempt a number of services offered by the City of Houston. I'm thankful for the ongoing conversations we are able to have with bill authors that help inform them of many, many unintended consequences that their bills would cause.

Eliminating the ability of local governments to hire lobbyists and fully participate in the legislative conversations would diminish the quality of legislation passed by the Legislature. I urge you to oppose Senate Bill 175.

Bill Kelly  
Director of Government Relations

<https://www.transparencyusa.org/tx/lobbying/client/city-of-houston/>

The screenshot shows the Transparency USA website interface. The header includes the Transparency USA logo, navigation links (Overview, Articles, Services, About, Search), and buttons for 'Subscribe' and 'Donate'. Below the header, there are filters for 'Texas' and '2022 Election', and a navigation menu with 'Lobbying' highlighted. The breadcrumb trail reads 'Overview > Texas > Lobbying Clients > City of Houston'. The main content area displays 'City of Houston Taxpayer-Funded' with a minimum amount of \$1,393,030 and a maximum amount of \$2,854,690. Below this, there are tabs for 'Overview', 'Individual Lobbyist Activity', and 'Also Known As'. The 'Lobbyist Summary' section includes a note: 'This organization hires the lobbyists listed below to advocate for their interests in Austin. This organization is also listed as a payee when they are paid by a candidate or committee. View those transactions here.' A table follows with columns for Lobbyist, Firm, Min Amount, and Max Amount.

Lobbyist	Firm	Min Amount	Max Amount
Crystal Brown	Public Policy Advisor	\$187,590.00	\$375,189.98
Neftali Partida	Government Relations	\$187,590.00	\$375,189.98
Robert D Miller	Attorney	\$187,590.00	\$375,189.98
Sarah Lacy	Locke Lord LLP	\$187,590.00	\$375,189.98

<https://www.houstontx.gov/govrelations/lobbying-contracts.html>

## GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

### Lobbying Contracts

#### *State Lobbying Contract*

On November 9, 2022 Houston City Council voted 16 to 1 to approve a two year agreement with Locke Lord LLP for state lobbying services for the City of Houston. The maximum spending authority for the agreement is \$757,000.00.

The scope of work requires the contractor to work with the Government Relations office to provide lobbying services for proactive legislation, adverse legislation, filed legislation, and general services.