



CITY OF HOUSTON

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Mayor

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April 6, 2021

The Honorable Paul Bettencourt
Chairman, Senate Committee on Local Government
P.O. Box 2919
Austin, TX 78768

Re: Senate Bill 10

The City of Houston appreciates the opportunity to offer testimony on public funding invested in lobbying. Employing more than 22,000 people with an annual budget of over \$5 billion, the City of Houston has many varied interests before the Texas Legislature, ranging from law enforcement policy, environmental regulations, and even manned space flight policy.

Today, the City of Houston is supporting bills in House Business & Industry on utility interruptions, 2 supportive cards and 2 opposes in House Judiciary & Civil Jurisprudence on attorney fee matters with written testimony, 3 supportive cards in House Natural Resources on water quality standards, one in House Human Services on nursing facilities, multiple opposition cards in House Land and Resource Management on annexation & ETJ policy, and one oppose with two supporter cards for Senate Business & Commerce on open meetings and other legislation.

These were our 8am hearings today. We have 5 additional pieces of written testimonies, including this script, to do today.

My point is cities, by their nature, have interest as varied as any organization before the Legislature.

The Houston Government Relations Team has worked to provide transparency and accountability for our lobby teams with both our legislative reports and testimony before Houston City Council.

Just search “City of Houston Lobby Contracts” in any internet search engine, and our stand-alone page is the first hit. We list the date City Council voted, the contracts and names of firms we work with. We also list our Legislative Principles passed by City Council and our testimony, matching exactly what was voted on to what we do.

For example, in 2017, the City’s biggest issue was passing pension reform for our municipal, fire, and police pension systems. Thanks to the Legislature, the reforms passed with over 2/3 support in both the Senate and the House.

- It should be noted that just as the City hired lobbyists to help pass these vital reforms, the pension systems hired lobbyists as well. Stripping the ability of cities to fund lobbyists while allowing pension systems to continue using them is a very tenuous situation.

In 2019, Houston's focus was on lobbying for use of the state's Rainy-Day Fund to assist with recovery efforts from Hurricane Harvey.

- I've heard it said polling on this issue, the use of taxpayer funds for lobbying, isn't popular. Well, I can tell you the investment of \$670,000 over 2 years to ensure the maximum draw down from the State's Rainy Day fund for Harvey Repairs sure sounded good to Houstonians.

A criticism of government is often, "run it like a business," which is valid in many aspects. When it comes to lobbying, the expenditures on lobbyists for city interests is far below that of what private businesses spend. Our team is used to being undermanned and outgunned, but the suggestion that cities would be prohibited from hiring any lobbyists all together is tilting the field even further.

The ability for the City of Houston to invest in lobbyists for this session has not been raised by one constituent at a Council Member or through constituent correspondence to the Mayor's Office. The lobby contract passed unanimously at City Council. The only questions my office has ever received on lobby contracts was from Rep. Middleton's office who didn't know we had a website.

We knew this legislative session was going to be difficult and, in many ways, limited on what issues can be addressed in a session impacted by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. That's why we have invested in lobbyists to help promote the needs of the City of Houston taxpayers to your offices.

If you have suggestions on a more transparent or accountable way that we can operate, the City of Houston is prepared to partner with you. Our shared constituents are all invested in positive outcomes.

Restricting the ability for cities to advocate on the same playing field as unions, associations, and corporations will not help produce better informed policy. We hope the Legislature considers whether the perspective of one of the largest employers, largest law enforcement offices, largest provider of municipal services in Texas is worth listening to. Houston believes we deserve a voice in these debates.

Bill Kelly
Director of Government Relations