



CITY OF HOUSTON

Sylvester Turner

Mayor

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April 6, 2021

The Honorable Paul Bettencourt
Chair, Texas Senate Committee on Local Government
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Senator Bettencourt:

The City of Houston supports Rep. Giovanni Capriglione's House Bill 3687 and supports many of the aspects of Senate Bill 1879. Unfortunately, some of the provisions listed in the bill present both uncertainty and potential cost to the City. Because of that, we oppose SB 1879 but offer this testimony supporting governmental transparency for lobby contracts.

To be clear, the City of Houston supports (and already complies with) disclosures including the posting of:

1. The total amount spent on lobbying contracts,
2. The names of the members of the lobby team,
3. Copy of the contracts for the lobby team.

Our Government Relations website also lists the date when City Council approved this stand-alone item (for example, this year's lobby contract was approved unanimously). For reference, the website is here: <https://www.houstontx.gov/govrelations/lobbying-contracts.html>

In order for the general public to more easily see this information, Mayor Turner has linked them to our Government Relations site where they can be constantly updated and found via search engines. Currently, for reporting purposes, the City completes Form 1295 and sends to the Texas Ethics Commission.

Senate Bill 1879 uses a vague definition of lobbying without referencing registration in Chapter 305, as the Capriglione bill does. Instead, it states a city "may spend money to directly or indirectly influence or attempt to influence the outcome of any legislation pending before the legislature only if the expenditure is authorized by a majority vote of the governing body of the political subdivision or entity in an open meeting of the governing body." It further states the expenditure must be a standalone item.

This definition is overly broad and could encompass a myriad of actions.

For example, the City of Houston funds Commander Jessica Anderson to work with members of the Texas Legislature on policing items as well as an advocate for City of Houston measures encompassing law enforcement, like human trafficking, among others.

She is a Commander in the Houston Police Department, which means her salary and reporting go through the Police Chief rather than to the Mayor's Government Relations Team. Despite being the most transparent GR Department in Texas, the City of Houston would be in violation of SB 1879.

The legislation states "an interested party is entitled to appropriate injunctive relief to prevent further activity in violation of this section." Remember, the legislation defines a disclosure requirement for anyone directly or indirectly trying to influence legislation, which could mean anyone that works for the City of Houston.

The requirement that anyone who offers influence on legislation must be approved in a stand alone item does not make sense for a 22,000 employee organization. Currently, on our website, we note 17 different employees from the City of Houston who have contributed testimony in this Session.

Again, the City of Houston under Mayor Sylvester Turner has made finding the amounts, the contracts, and the names of lobbyists very easy for the general public to find. We look forward to discussions to see how we can better inform the public.

Sincerely,

Bill Kelly
Director of Government Relations