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## Legislature

# Blurred line between lobbying and lawmaking

BY ELISABETH PARKER

Ethics laws in many states frown on elected officials working for lobbyist principals, and for good reason. There's something fishy about a lawmaker taking money from an organization that employs lobbyists for the purpose of convincing the lawmaker to vote for or against certain bills. The working relationship may be completely honest – there may not be any vote-trading at all – but it doesn't look good to the public.

Rep. Russell Ott, for example, was previously a lobbyist for the S.C. Farm Bureau, as well as their state legislative affairs coordinator. When his father, Harry Ott, resigned as a legislator in 2013 for a position with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Russell won his father's seat. Following election, Ott continued to do consulting work for the Farm Bureau. As The Nerve reported two years ago, Ott denies any conflict, even though he sits on the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, which any legislation important to the Farm Bureau would have to pass.

Around the same time, a bill was proposed that restricted farmers from obtaining surface water (S.970), which directly relates to one of the Farm Bureau's legislative priorities, according to the organization's

website. Ott spoke with Sen. Chip Campsen about the bill – Campsen was the bill's sponsor – but he said afterward that Ott did not specifically mention the position the Farm Bureau took on the issue.

Until September of this year, Rep. Todd Atwater was the CEO of the S.C. Medical Association. One of the key issues the S.C. Medical Association advocates for is telemedicine, which is the ability of physicians to use telecommunications technology in order to treat their patients.

In the most recent legislative session, the Telemedicine Act was passed and signed by the governor. Rep. Atwater voted for it. But on a different priority for the Medical Association, the allowance of marijuana for medical use, Atwater did recuse himself in the 2013-14 session.

Even when legislators don't work for a lobbyist principal, it's still possible for them to funnel money or sponsor legislation that benefits their employer. Rep. Mike Forrester is the director of economic development at the Spartanburg Community College. The Nerve reported last year that Forrester opposed an amendment that would cap appropriations to the Small Business Development Center Program. Rep. Jonathon Hill questioned Forrester on the House floor, pointing out that the program

would greatly benefit the community college, and asked if Forrester's opposition to the amendment would be a conflict of interest. Forrester said no, though he ill-advisedly admitted, "It's good business for me." Two days earlier, he proposed an amendment that would give \$3 million to the Department of Employment and Workforce, the state's economic development agency, even though the college lists DEW as a "collaborative partner" (meaning DEW gives the college money).

Organizations that have legislators on their board also benefit. In 2013 Sen. Paul Campbell spoke in favor of overriding the governor's veto of funds for the Southeastern Wildlife Expo (SEWE), a three-day exposition. Campbell was serving on the board of SEWE in 2013 and the SEWE website says he is still on the board. And of course several lawmakers sit on the boards of nonprofit organizations that get direct state appropriations.

Becoming a lawmaker means a lot of things. In South Carolina, though, it doesn't usually involve cutting ties to the groups that would like to influence you.

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