

Susan Moffat
Testimony to Ethics Review Commission
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I'm Susan Moffat, speaking in support of this measure, which will add much-needed transparency to city processes and decisions, especially lobbyist interactions with staff. This proposal is crucial to rebuilding public trust and countering the perception – often the reality – of undue influence behind the scenes. These reforms are thoughtful, reasonable and long overdue.

To name a current example, a national corporation hired away the previous mayor's director of communications mid-way through a public process on an ordinance that would directly affect that company's bottom line.

This person was named "Director of Government Relations," a title universally understood to mean lobbyist, and the press release stated he would manage "...all aspects of government relations, with a focus on developing strategy and implementation for cities" to regulate and benefit their industry. This person has been a regular presence at City Hall since taking his job over two years ago - yet he is still not registered as a city lobbyist.

City staff can make some very large decisions administratively, without Council's blessing, and even when an item goes to Council, staff's recommendation carries great weight.

Unlike City Council, both staff and lobbyists tend to stay in their jobs for many years, making it increasingly easy to blur the line between friendship and professional objectivity. Lobbyists often develop ongoing relationships with staff - buying them lunch, doing favors – and while most city staff are upstanding professionals, it's only human nature to look more favorably on the hand that literally feeds you.

If you were here in 2006 when the Northcross Walmart supercenter case blew up, that was a classic example. At the time, that massive project required only administrative approval, which staff had already granted before the public even learned about project. When neighbors responded with outrage, the mayor told them it was a 'done deal' and that he had been briefed regularly by project lobbyists, as had the decision-makers on city staff.

Regular residents can't afford to be here every day and we don't generally enjoy the same chummy access to staff and council as professional lobbyists. I can't tell you how many times I've sat for hours in city meetings, looking over at the highly paid lobbyist for the other side and imagining a taxi meter going off over his head as billed hundreds of dollars hourly, while I was paying a babysitter.

We're never going to truly level the playing field between regular citizens and paid lobbyists, but this proposal is the bare minimum to give the public a modicum of transparency and accountability.

I worked at the legislature for eight years, and when the Texas Legislature has stronger ethics and lobbying rules than the City of Austin, you know something needs to be fixed.

I hope you will support this long overdue proposal to restore transparency and public trust in our city. Thank you.