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Turnpike pays high toll for Pennsylvania, D.C. lobbying

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By Joe Grata, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When it comes to lobbying, the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission is one big spender on the federal and state levels.

In 2007, the turnpike commission spent \$396,000 in Washington, D.C., more than most large cities and states. It was one of only a few U.S. toll road or bridge agencies to shell out any money at all for politically related activities.

At the same time, the turnpike commission spent an additional \$316,200 on what it characterized as "government relations" at the state level, often to gain the ear of lawmakers who passed the unprecedented transportation bill this past summer that directed the agency to toll Interstate 80 and raise its own tolls in order to provide record amounts of money for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

Because the lobbying firms received blanket payments, the commission has no itemized breakdowns to indicate hours worked, individual compensation rates, specifics of lobbying activities or expenses for travel, lodging and "wine-and-dine" activities.

Records do identify the lobbyists and subcontractors who did its bidding, many of whom are former elected officials or other politically connected people, such as former U.S. Rep. Ron Klink, of Westmoreland County. Joe Brimmeier, who was Mr. Klink's chief of staff in the 1990s, is now the turnpike commission's chief executive officer.

In addition to outside firms, the commission has its own \$132,000-a-year political go-between, Director of Government Affairs John Martino, a former Republican Party official in Lancaster County and executive director of the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia in the early 1990s.

Although using ex-public officials and high-profile government appointees is commonplace in lobbying, critics have branded the turnpike commission's lobbying as self-preservation and a means of offering political rewards.

Turnpike commission officials countered that Washington, D.C., lobbying efforts have garnered \$180.6 million in federal funds since 1991, money they said might not otherwise have been appropriated to the agency that was self-supporting for the first 50 years of its 68-year existence.

"We're one of the largest tolling agencies in the world, and we go after the big dollars," Mr. Brimmeier said. "In order to do that, we hire professionals ... the best we can find. If the Post-Gazette wanted a transportation story, it wouldn't hire [veteran sportscaster] Stan Savran to write it."

In a study on spending on federal lobbying by city and state entities during the first six

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months of 2007, Washington, D.C.-based Center for Responsive Politics, a nonprofit research group that tracks political spending, ranked the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission fourth nationally on a "Top 15" list.

The commonwealth of Pennsylvania, lobbying separately, led the list at \$505,000, followed by the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration and Miami-Dade County, Fla., both at \$320,000; the Pennsylvania Turnpike, \$280,000; and Los Angeles County, \$265,000.

Also, only a few toll road and toll bridge agencies hired their own lobbyists at the federal level last year, including Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority, \$60,000 (first six months); Alaska Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, \$50,000; Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District, \$40,000; and Delaware River Port Authority -- the Pennsylvania-New Jersey board that operates the Benjamin Franklin, Walt Whitman and Betsy Ross toll bridges in the Philadelphia area -- \$110,000.

Other turnpike agencies typically contact their members of Congress directly or go through lobbying agencies that represent their states as a whole.

The Harrisburg-based Commonwealth Foundation, a research and education group, said the turnpike commission's big spending on lobbyists is consistent "with its history as a cash cow for political appointees and campaign contributions."

"It's not surprising that the turnpike commission is willing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to defend its fiefdom," foundation President/Chief Executive Officer Matthew Brouillette said. "It's unfortunate, however, that there are so many hired guns willing to work on the commission's behalf and against the best interests of the people of Pennsylvania."

While noting that the turnpike commission outspent the state of Texas for federal lobbying, U.S. Rep. John Peterson, R-Venango, said none of Gov. Ed Rendell's or the commission's "lobbyist buddies" contacted him as a member of the Pennsylvania congressional delegation before the state chose to toll I-80, which passes through part of his district.

"I'm not saying it's wrong not to ever hire lobbyists, but spending nearly \$1 million is an obvious misuse of the limited transportation resources," said Mr. Peterson, who was at the forefront of efforts to block I-80 tolling. "It's obvious that the turnpike commission is a wasteful, unnecessary bureaucracy. Pennsylvania would be better off without it."

Turnpike commission spokesman Bill Capone said what's obvious are the results: \$79.2 million in federal money for the Mon-Fayette Expressway and Southern Beltway in southwestern Pennsylvania; \$76.3 million for a new turnpike/Interstate 95 interchange in the Philadelphia area; and \$25.1 million for intelligent transportation systems statewide, such as changeable message signs and a special fog alert system on a mountainous stretch near Breezewood.

"[Critics] can characterize lobbying any way they want, but look at the results," Mr. Capone said. "Based on the federal funding earmarks we've received, it's been money well spent."

Records obtained by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette show 20 people from seven firms -- five working as subcontractors -- participated in state and federal lobbying efforts last year.

At the federal level, American Continental Group had a \$33,000-a-month contract to represent the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission. David Urban, its managing partner, was chief of staff to U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., from 1997 to 2002.

American Continental contracted some of its representation to other lobbying firms,

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including Ron Klink and Associates; Borski Associates, headed by former U.S. Rep. Bob Borski, D-Philadelphia, once the second-ranking member of the House Transportation Committee; Pittsburgh law firm Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott Inc.; and Loeper and Associates.

Former state Rep. Dave Mayernik, D-Ross, was identified as participating in lobbying on behalf of Eckert Seamans. Former state Senate Majority Leader Joseph Loeper heads Loeper and Associates. He ended up in federal prison in 2002, partly for not disclosing he was paid \$300,000 by a Philadelphia tax collection agency that sought his assistance in getting state contracts.

At the state level, the turnpike commission paid \$26,350 a month to Harrisburg-based Bravo Corp., a communications and government relations agency headed by Chris Bravacos, former director of legislative affairs in Gov. Tom Ridge's administration.

Although Bravo's contract ended Dec. 31 and has not been renewed, Mr. Capone said that doesn't necessarily mean it won't be.

He said its hiring was justified by intense activities leading up to Act 44 and its final passage that created a "public-public partnership" between PennDOT and the turnpike commission, with the latter obligated to generate billions of dollars in new revenue.

"Act 44 is having a major impact on this agency, like Act 61 [toll road expansion law], when the Legislature looked to us to finance projects and raise money that it chose not to do," Mr. Capone said.

"It put us in a unique position as a revenue generator for all types of transportation in Pennsylvania."

Bravo hired Commonwealth Strategic Solutions and Michael Long as a lobbyist subcontractor for an unspecified fee. Mr. Long, who was chief of staff to former Senate President Pro Tem Robert Jubelirer, R-Altoona, was paid a \$22,500 bonus by legislative leaders in 2006 before his boss, Mr. Jubelirer, was defeated in a re-election bid.

Mr. Long often opposed Democrat policies put forth by Gov. Ed Rendell, who has proposed leasing the turnpike to private investors despite having signed Act 44 into law.

Turnpike commission records also showed subcontracted lobbying activity was done on its behalf last year by Roscommon International Inc., of Bala Cynwyd, Montgomery County. Its President/CEO is Sean M. Reilly, once state and political director for former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa. Mr. Reilly holds a nonpaid, appointed state position as a member of the Pennsylvania State Transportation Advisory Commission, which is part of PennDOT.

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