

Being the Government Watchdog: Legislative Corruption
Phil Williams, WTVF-TV
pwilliams@newschannel5.com
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“NewsChannel 5 Investigates: Capitol Hill Corruption” represented a three-year commitment to investigate the abuses of power on Tennessee’s Capitol Hill. When FBI agents descended on the legislature in late May 2005, one lawmaker noted in his blog that NewsChannel 5 had “sounded the alarm” before the raids.

Text from the stories, plus a one-hour documentary, may be viewed at <http://www.newschannel5.com/content/investigates/9637.asp>

Among the questions raised by the continuing investigation were:

1. Who’s Influencing Your Lawmakers, and What Do They Want?

Special-interests spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year to influence legislation at all levels of government. Check with the agencies in your state that regulate lobbyists/campaign finances to obtain lists of:

- Registered lobbyists and their clients
- Expenditures by those lobbyists/clients to influence legislation (where available)
- Campaign financial disclosure reports
- Political action committee (PAC) disclosure reports

Develop relationships with good-government advocates to learn where lawmakers and lobbyists mingle after legislative sessions. Take a camera, and show your viewers.

Check out the Center for Public Integrity’s web site for more background on lobbying in the states: <http://www.publicintegrity.org/hiredguns/>

Also, see National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has a breakdown of lobbying laws in the states: <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/ethics/lawsforlobbyists.htm>
See also the section on gifts and honorariums:
http://www.ncsl.org/programs/ethics/gifts_and_honorariums.htm

2. Who’s Paying Your Lawmakers, and What Do They Want?

A big red flag: A lawmaker whose occupation is “consultant” may be setting himself or herself up for payments from special interests.

Check with the agency in your state that regulates lawmakers and their personal financial interests to obtain (where available):

- Sources of income by lawmakers and their immediate family members
- Other business affiliations, both for-profit and non-profit

Also, background prominent and suspicious lawmakers through Autotrack or Accurint.

Check divorce files, bankruptcies and other court cases for information about sources of income.

If a lawmaker gains income from a regulated business, check with regulators for any documentation about the nature of the relationship, plus any activity by the lawmaker with the regulators on behalf of the business.

If a public entity leaves behind trash, they also may leave behind a story. When one lawmaker was forced out of his office, we helped dispose of the trash left in his desk in the Senate chambers: <http://newschannel5.com/content/investigates/12824.asp>

The Center for Public Integrity has a section on personal financial disclosure: <http://www.publicintegrity.org/oi/>

NCSL has good background on conflict-of-interest laws: http://www.ncsl.org/programs/ethics/conflict_of_interest_home.htm

3. Are Your Lawmakers Helping Themselves?

Brainstorm about all the ways that state governments give your tax money – economic grants and loans, for example – then look for lawmakers who benefit. Obtain lists of expenditures and cross-reference them with lawmakers’ addresses, businesses, etc.

Our investigation found one financially troubled senator who used state grants and loans to help him get a big sale price on a piece of land that he had not been able to sell: <http://www.newschannel5.com/content/investigates/1138.asp>

Search through appropriation amendments filed by lawmakers to discover how they might helping entities with whom they might be affiliated. Our investigation found one senator who steered millions to companies that shared the same address as his office: <http://channel5web1.atiba.com/content/investigates/10859.asp>

4. Is That Really a Campaign Expense?

Just like you background your lawmakers, you can also background the people and businesses to which they are paying their campaign funds. Is it really just a backdoor way for them to take money from special interests and put it into their own pockets?

Our investigation discovered one lawmaker who reported a campaign expenditure to a company listed as “Awesome Videos.” In fact, there was no company by that name, but there was a company called “Awesome Wedding Videos.” Searches of marriage records revealed that the expenditure coincided with his daughter’s wedding and led to even more questionable expenditures: <http://www.newschannel5.com/content/investigates/9316.asp>

5. Who's Policing Your Lawmakers? What Are the Loopholes that Lawmakers Have Written for Themselves?

The Golden Rule means one thing in churches and discussions of moral issues. But, for legislators, their version of the Golden Rule has a much different result:

He who has the gold... makes the rules.

Investigate the ethics process: What are the loopholes that allow lawmakers to engage in business as usual? Have your lawmakers established regulatory mechanisms that are little more than a sham? Have the ethics committees or other regulatory agencies ever really done anything? Or, if a regulatory agency has done its job, have lawmakers threatened its funding as a result? Who really polices your lawmakers?

NCSL has more background on the regulators:

http://www.ncsl.org/programs/ethics/committee_commission_home.htm