

COURT SYSTEM'S LOBBYIST LEAVING AFTER 13 YEARS

By Jill Duman

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SACRAMENTO — Ray LeBov, the state court system's longtime lobbyist, is leaving his government job for private practice.

The 57-year-old lawyer and former legislative analyst is widely credited with winning legislative support for the court system's move to state funding and more centralized administration, a process that began in the mid-1990s.

"It's very simple," says Michael Belote, a lobbyist for the California Judges Association. "Prior to Ray joining the Judicial Council, it was a lobbying backwater. He turned it into probably the best lobbying operation of any state agency I have seen."

Until Chief Justice Ronald George began his long march toward stable court funding, legislators had little interest in the nuts and bolts of court administration and funding.

"When I first started here" — after the state Supreme Court angered legislators by upholding term limits — "relations between the two branches were very, very bad," recalls LeBov. "I would like to think that one of my major accomplishments has been getting the branches to understand each other better and to work better together in the interests of the state."

"We certainly worked as a team," George said Monday. "He has been excellent in working with other constituencies to muster a broad range of support for our issues."

Since LeBov's hire in 1991, the lobbying office has doubled in size. It now fields eight advocates, or lobbyists, and six staffers. He hasn't sent a departure date, but said he would leave before the end of the year.

George and William Vickrey, the administrative director of the courts, say they haven't yet worked out plans for how LeBov will be replaced. But outsiders pointed to Kate Howard, LeBov's assistant director, as a likely successor.

"Part of Ray's increasing uniqueness in the world of lobbyists is that he's been around," says Drew Liebert, who is chief counsel to the Assembly Judiciary Committee — the same job LeBov held for 12 years before joining the Judicial Council's Office of Governmental Affairs in 1991.

Liebert gives LeBov high marks for "a terrific institutional memory" and for being "a really fine legislation tactician."

"If there's one currency Ray trades in, it's relationships," says Liebert. "He takes great pains to establish good relations with all the key legislators and staff that affect the judiciary. He also has an uncanny ability to speak with candor in a system that too often discourages it."

LeBov says he left his legislative post when heavy budget cuts prompted senior staffers to take advantage of “really attractive” severance options. He decided to take the lobbying post because it was a “natural progression in terms of giving me the opportunity to continue working on issues I really cared about” — including state funding of local courts, which had been attempted, but not achieved, when LeBov worked for the Legislature.

LeBov made it the mission of his office to connect with legislators and educate them about the importance of the state’s trial and appellate courts. That helped lay the groundwork for George’s successful effort to win state funding for trial courts and other related reforms.

“I think the most important thing Ray has been able to do in conjunction with Ron George as chief justice is to really improve the Legislature’s attitude toward the courts,” said Donald Green, chief legislative advocate for Consumer Attorneys of California and a 20-year colleague of LeBov.

Legislators even passed a resolution last week in his honor.

“Ray LeBov has embodied the best of a government lobbyist,” said Assembly Judiciary Chair Ellen Corbett, D-San Leandro. “His work has expanded access to justice for all Californians.”