

VETERAN LOBBYIST SHOWS POLITICOS HOW IT'S DONE

LeBov gives behind-the-scenes training on the Capitol legislative scene

By Kathy Robertson, Sacramento Business Journal

To some employers, what goes on at the state Capitol seems just plain “weird.”

There’s an established path from idea to bill to law, but many skip that route. Legislators can be fractious and have term limits that keep their tenure short. Public spending priorities often get punted to the ballot box.

The confusing landscape of California politics got a little murkier with the defeat of Proposition 93, a ballot initiative to change term limits. Legislative leaders who had thought they would stay in place a few more years face upheaval, and no one is sure what they’ll do next or who the new leaders will be.

It helps to know the gritty stuff that goes on behind the scenes, so growing numbers of students – including businesses that want to influence events at the Capitol – are taking classes from veteran lobbyist Ray LeBov to help them understand the place.

“When I graduated from law school and came to Sacramento, I felt I had been deposited on another planet,” LeBov said. “I had no clue.”

He went to work, soaking up the vibe of the place like a sponge, paying attention to who was successful, who wasn’t and why. After 17 years working for the Legislature and 13 as a lobbyist, he’s now teaching others what he learned in a series of seminars that mix information with humor.

“Lobbying 101” is a myth-buster on basic civics with a California twist. Lobbying 201 brings in outside speakers on various topics and looks at the regulatory process.

“California politics are such an anomaly with so many different nuances that having someone like Ray give you a bit of a road map is great,” said Tara McGovern, director of government relations for the Engineering and Utilities Contractors Association, the largest union contractors association in the western United States.

“California is weird. I have a degree in political science and there’s stuff I didn’t know,” McGovern said. “He makes you comfortable enough to ask silly questions.”

30 years under the dome

It took LeBov a while to figure it out himself. The Yale undergraduate went to law school at the University of Southern California before starting his career in Sacramento in 1975 as counsel to the Legislature's Joint Committee on the Structure of the Judiciary. LeBov served in various legislative staff positions for 17 years, most of it as counsel to the Assembly Committee on the Judiciary.

Term limits approved by California voters in 1990 prompted big cuts in administrative staff. LeBov picked up a nice severance package and moved on to the Judicial Council of California, first as staff and then as a lobbyist.

After leaving state service in 2004, he founded Ray LeBov and Associates, a Sacramento-based lobbying and consulting firm that represents a few clients. They include the California Lyme Disease Association, a Southern California-based energy-efficient lighting company called Progressive Lighting, and California Appellate Defense Counsel.

Where's the wiggle room?

More than 300 students have taken classes since LeBov started teaching in May 2006. At \$250 each, they're not cheap. Yet they are attracting a wide scope of students, from people who want to become lobbyists to Capitol veterans angling for a few new tricks.

Classes also are packed with employers who want to know more about what the lobbyists they hire actually do -- and with people who support lobbyists, such as the administrative and communications staff of trade groups.

Dorothy Leland, a government affairs volunteer with the Lyme Disease Association, took all three classes to find out how to communicate effectively about a controversial disease that even doctors can't agree upon. The group has sponsored some legislation in the past and may do so again in the future. LeBov is their lobbyist, but Leland wanted to know more about how things really work.

"I got more of an appreciation of the behind-the-scenes legwork that has to be done and the people you need to talk to," Leland said.

"There's a sense that a bill springs forth full-blown and the only action is what happens on the floor -- but that is really only a small part of it."

The meandering path of the California state budget from its first detail until approval gets heads shaking, too.

“I understood there is the State of the State, the governor’s budget and then everybody fights for a while. Then there’s the May revise, and everybody fights again until August. To understand what’s static, what’s not and where there’s wiggle room is important,” said McGovern from the contractors association.

“If people had a basic understanding of how it works up there -- politically and ethically -- Sacramento would be a different place.”

Lobbying insights

Ray LeBov shares suggestions from capitol pundits and committee consultants:

“Virtually every single deadline in the life cycle of legislation can be avoided by rule waivers.”

“Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Playing ‘hide the ball’ pisses me off. I’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Know what you are talking about when you propose a change in public policy. No serious legislative staff is interested in your good looks or Kings tickets.”

“Picking the author is one of the most critical decisions you make. There are advantages to having an influential, powerful author, but not all bills require ‘heavy lifting.’”