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SPECIAL EDITION

The Price of Partying

Lobbying groups in Frankfort are spending more than ever to host events for Kentucky state legislators. From biscuit breakfasts and fancy dinners to bourbon and cigars, lobbying events help define the rhythm of Frankfort. **A Herald-Leader investigation** looks closely and asks: **What are legislators and lobbyists getting out of it — and does it affect Kentucky?**



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IT'S OBSCENE. IT BUYS ACCESS TO LEGISLATORS, BASICALLY. REGULAR PEOPLE CAN'T COME TO A FRANKFORT PARTY, OR INVITE YOU TO DINNER, OR GET YOU A SNACK, OR DRINK AND TALK TO YOU ABOUT THEIR BILL.

Rep. Mary Lou Marzian



Legislators and visitors walk up the steps to the Senate chambers at the Kentucky state Capitol in Frankfort, Ky., on Monday, April 15, 2024.

RYAN C. HERMENS rhermens@herald-leader.com

Lobbyists spend more and more to host legislators

HOW KENTUCKY'S LEGISLATURE RUNS ON FREE LUNCHES & RECEPTIONS

BY AUSTIN HORN
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FRANKFORT

State ethics laws forbid lobbyists from buying a Kentucky legislator anything — even a simple cup of coffee. But there's a workaround: Invite the entire legislature, or one of its many groups, and they're free to wine and dine members with the hope of influencing the policies they pursue. There's no limit to what companies and advocacy groups can spend on these events in their efforts to sway lawmakers. And spend they do.

Elaborate receptions, quick sandwich get-togethers for lunch, Chik-Fil-A breakfast biscuit buffets or even a few rounds of booze — these events help define the rhythms of Frankfort before, during and after legislators deliberate on bills that could affect Kentucky's 4.5 million residents.

These events had a total reported pricetag of \$484,000 throughout 2024, according to records obtained by the Herald-Leader from the Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission.

That marked a 160% increase from the pre-pandemic norm.

Their prevalence is raising alarm among some political observers and Democrats who see a legislature more oriented toward the interests of who can pay a top lobbyist or host an expensive reception.

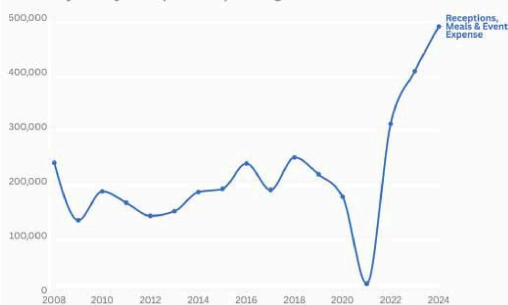
"It's obscene. It buys access to legislators, basically," said Rep. Mary Lou Marzian. "Regular people can't come to a Frankfort party, or invite you to dinner, or get you a snack, or drink and talk to you about their bill."

The Louisville Democrat took office in 1992, retired in 2022 before returning this year after being reelected in 2024. She said she's seen Frankfort's culture and its legislative output grow more dominated by special interests over that time.

While many Republicans would disagree, the numbers show a significant spike in spending by special interest groups.

From 2008 to 2019, the annual reporting on

Kentucky Lobbyist Reported Spending on Meals & Events



Source: Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission

lobbying events hovered around \$186,000. The 2024 total of \$484,000 is 2.6 times that previous amount.

This comes as the overall lobbying spend hit a historic high in 2024 at nearly \$28.2 million, a figure that includes events. The balance mostly pays for salaries of lobbyists currying favor in Frankfort.

That's also up from the pre-pandemic average, though the recent jump in events spending

is bigger.

Annual numbers for 2025 won't be available until next year.

The Herald-Leader's review of the trend includes on-the-ground reporting from events, data analysis dating back almost 20 years and interviews with legislators, lobbyists and observers alike.

SEE LOBBYING, 4A

FROM PAGE 3A

LOBBYING

The reasons given for the increase vary. Lobbyists point to inflated hospitality service prices, as those companies try to regain profits lost from the COVID-19 pandemic. Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, and others say a growing recognition of the Republican-dominated legislature's power is attracting more investment in building those relationships.

Whitney Westerfield, a former state senator who left office in 2024 and chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee, doesn't think the events are particularly influential — or even a good use of lobbyist money.

"I found them to be, with respect to the people putting them on, a waste of my time," Westerfield said. "They were social events. There was not a lot of substance."

"If they thought it was helping with this issue or their cause, it sure didn't with this legislator."

But the ledger still shows that groups looking to influence the legislature see a use for these events.

"It is very concerning when so much money is spent on lobbying events, wining and dining," Rep. Tina Bojanowski, D-Louisville, said. "Whoever has the most money usually tends to get what they want, and they're smart people."

"If it wasn't working they wouldn't do it." The total amount of money spent on the events is likely higher.

The Legislative Ethics Commission asks lobbying groups to report what they spend specifically on legislators or staff — not other lobbyists or unaffiliated persons like their significant others. Sometimes those groups report the whole cost of events anyway and sometimes they don't, commission staff told the Herald-Leader. That opens up the possibility of reporting a much lower figure than what was spent on the event as a whole.

WHY THE INCREASE IN LOBBYING EVENTS?

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the inflated prices for goods were felt around the world.

Costs related to hosting legislative events were no

exception, according to longtime lobbyist Tom Underwood. The hospitality industry, he said, has tried to make up for lost time and money due to the dearth of such events for a couple years.

"Post-COVID, meeting facilities and catering went through the roof. You're paying a ton for just a Coke for an attendee. It cost them a fortune and they're trying to make it up now," Underwood, who works for The Rotunda Group representing various industry associations, said.

Beyond inflation, the chart of spending from 2008 to 2019 also tracks generally with America's trajectory of slow but steady recovery from the Great Recession.

The number of groups — companies and nonprofits alike — interested in lobbying the legislature has also increased over time, though not as quickly as the overall spend.

Lobbying groups hosting or contributing to events for legislators rose steadily over that time period, from 211 in 2008 to 338 last year.

This could be due to a growing realization among Kentucky's powerbrokers that the state legislature's GOP caucuses are actively reshaping the state, whether that's through the activation of its near-complete ban on abortion, its work reducing the state's income tax rate or any number of important issues.

That's the reason Stivers, one of the most powerful men in Frankfort, first cited when asked about the rising cost of these events.

Stivers contrasted legislative power to that of Gov. Andy Beshear, whose powers the legislature has continually targeted in the Democrat's five-plus years in office.

"It's because individuals who are interested in policy see the (reality) that the legislature is key to getting policies that they are philosophically aligned with... The



Rep. Tina Bojanowski, D-Louisville



Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, along with other Senate leaders and constitutional officers, hosts a media availability press conference addressing the bills passed during the 2025 Legislative session in the Senate's temporary chambers on June 25, 2025, in Frankfort, Ky.

governor can't pass a law," Stivers said. "In fact, he probably has an adverse impact. So they don't go to the governor; they go to the legislature."

This isn't just chest-thumping on Stivers' part. It's a widely recognized truth, said former Secretary of State Trey Grayson, a Republican and lobbyist for the firm Frost Brown Todd.

"The General Assembly is taking the lead in public policy development," Grayson said. "They're taking the lead in drafting the budget, so engaging — whether that's hiring contract lobbyists, inside lobbyists or hosting receptions — it doesn't surprise me that it's gone up."

With the acknowledgment that the Republican caucus is the one driving nearly all policy decisions, another aspect of the increase in spending could be how big those caucuses are. Republicans claim 32 of the 38 members of the Senate and 80 of the 100 seats in the House of Representatives.

That's a greater number than the Democrats ever hit in their 75-year run holding both the House and Senate.

So from an events standpoint, there are more mouths to feed — literally.

Another change when comparing the previous two years with the 2008-2019 range is the emergence of a few high-dollar spenders.

In 2019, only two groups spent more than \$8,000 on events for legislators. But in 2024, 13 organizations spent at least that much, and some of them were relatively new to the Frankfort scene.

One of them is Danny Wimmer Presents, the events company behind Louisville's massive Bourbon & Beyond and Louder Than Life music festivals. Louisville Tourism said the September festivals drew nearly 400,000 people and generated \$33 million in economic

impact in 2024.

The group makes two tickets to both events available to all of Kentucky's 138 legislators. It reports the face value of those redeemed tickets to the Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission, a spokesperson told the Herald-Leader.

Those redemptions totaled \$3,650 in 2022 when the company started offering them. In 2023, legislators redeemed \$5,625 in tickets. In 2024, that number hit \$9,150. Organizations do not have to report which legislators took take them up on the free perks, only the total value.

General admission tickets to the entire slate of performances over four days cost around \$500 at each festival.

During the 2025 session, lawmakers passed a bill offering a 50% state sales tax break to festivals meeting a certain attendance and length threshold; Louder Than Life and Bourbon & Beyond, along with Lexington's Railbird music festival, were the only three to meet those requirements.

Louisville Mayor Craig Greenberg said that the bill was passed in part because Danny Wimmer Presents "had questions" about the festivals' "long-term future in our state."

The top events spender in 2024 was the Kentucky Justice Association, a plaintiff's attorneys trade group. Just over half of their reported \$10,610 in spending was for a Tuesday evening event titled "Orders of the Day: Cigar Rolling & Bourbon Pouring — Celebrating National Cigar Day."

The Kentucky Distillers Association also co-hosted and chipped in for that event, held at the Kentucky Justice Association's headquarters next to the Capitol.

In 2023, the biggest events spender by a wide margin was the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky

International Airport, also known as CVG. The vast majority of its \$19,584 in event expenses was put toward a Kentucky Chamber of Commerce dinner in February and a women's summit in July, after the session that year had already ended.

During the next session, a budget year, CVG was awarded \$20 million for economic development, the most of any airport in the state by far.

LOBBYING BEYOND THE LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Many lobbying events for legislators take place beyond Frankfort and outside the three-month time frame in which most legislative sessions take place.

Lobbyist groups follow legislators all across the country to host dinners and offer drinks at conferences, partisan and nonpartisan alike.

In 2024, that included:

- A sponsored "Kentucky Night" at a Denver, Colorado, meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council, the premier conservative state legislative group
- Three events at the National Conference of State Legislators gathering, which was held in Louisville that year
- Two sponsored events at the Southern Legislative Conference, which was held at the luxurious Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia
- Two "Kentucky Nights" at National Conference of Insurance Legislators events in Costa Mesa, California, and San Antonio, Texas.

In 2022, four lobbying groups reported around \$12,000 on a reception and a "Kentucky happy hour" for legislators at the Council of State Governments conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. In 2023, Sazerac, the parent company of Frankfort distiller Buffalo Trace, sponsored an "after party" in Charleston, South Carolina, where the Southern Legislative Conference was held.

Bojanowski said the "Kentucky Night" events at the major conferences are basically "big parties" and feature an open bar.

"It's just like walking in to a bar on a crowded night: Lots of cocktail tables and there's food, and you just mingle like you would in a bar setting," Bojanowski said. "But you do have a chance to get to know colleagues who you don't know very well, which can be a good thing because you need to get to know each member as a person."

She guessed that the crowd on such nights is "several hundred," about one-quarter of whom are Kentucky legislators. According to the Legislative Ethics Commission, 187 different organizations reported spending a total of \$28,862 on the "Kentucky Night" event held at the National Conference of State Legislators in Louisville.

Events leading up to the legislative session are common, too.

Records show that during late 2024, a month before they gavelled in for 2025, lobbying groups reported spending around \$2,600 on the Senate GOP caucus retreat and \$10,900 on the House's Republican retreat held in advance of the session.

For the House GOP retreats in 2023 and 2024, one night ended with drinks and a round of karaoke featuring lobbyists and legislators alike, according to multiple lawmakers in attendance.

"The singing was so bad that I felt the need to leave," Rep. Josh



Then-Sen. Whitney Westerfield in his office at the Capitol in Frankfort, Ky., in 2024. He did not seek reelection that year.

SEE LOBBYING, 5A

An inside look into Frankfort lobbying events: Bourbon, breakfast & Jimmy John's

BY AUSTIN HORN
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FRANKFORT

Meals and events meant to sway Kentucky state legislators are a growing part of business in Frankfort.

In 2024, the total reported amount that lobbying groups spent on such events was \$484,000, a 160% increase from the pre-pandemic average.

The rise has raised some eyebrows among Democrats and observers. Others argue the events — whether that's an elaborate reception or a quick breakfast — do little to sway policy or are merely a reflection of the increasingly active way the GOP-led legislature is shaping the state.

But what actually happens at a legislative reception?

The Herald-Leader observed one such event in March 2024: a St. Patrick's Day reception hosted by McCarthy Strategic Solutions, which regularly ranks among the top lobbying firms in Frankfort.

Some dressed down, others still working out the creases from sitting in committee meetings all day, legislators and lobbyists alike took an end-of-session sigh of relief at Goodwood Brewing, just across the Kentucky River from the Capitol in downtown Frankfort.

The group picked through Irish egg rolls, beer cheese, pretzel bites and seasoned chips at a buffet. Tables were decorated with green streamers and plastic gold coins. Legislators sipped on shamrock-themed drinks overlooking the Kentucky River as spring's first warm evening arrived.

A crowd of Republican legislators cheered "aye," grinning with pride when Pikeville GOP Sen. Phillip Wheeler's face appeared on the bar's television screen. He was featured on a WKYT report defending House Bill 5, a controversial law that added criminal penalties for the homeless, vandals and violent offenders, among other things.

One Louisville legislator joked to a group of others that he was preparing to file a resolution in honor of Kenny Payne, the former University of Louisville basketball head coach who was fired the previous day after a lacrosse 12-52 in his only two seasons with the Cardinals.

The Herald-Leader was granted entry into the event with the stipulation that no on-record interviews would be conducted.

This was not a raucous party. Most, if they drank, limited themselves to a couple alcoholic beverages.

But it was a decidedly more relaxed space compared to how the public generally sees the state's policymakers, whether that be through the KET cameras or at formally arranged meetings in their stuffy offices.

Legislators spoke freely of policy battles, like the Republicans' increased oversight of the state's largest school system, as well as upcoming primary challenges.

Most of those in attendance at the McCarthy event were Republican. McCarthy himself lobbies on both sides of the aisle, but is known — as are most of the more successful Frankfort legislative lobbyists these days — for his ties to the GOP.

McCarthy serves as the state GOP's national committee member.

Twenty-two different organizations sponsored the reception, chipping in a total of \$3,697 to entertain legislators, according to the Legislative Ethics Commission.

These sorts of events are where much of the business of lobbying occurs and has always occurred.



State Rep. Josh Calloway, center, talks to Nate Morris, left, during the Morris campaign launch event on Monday, June 30, 2025, at Paroquet Springs Conference Center in Shepherdsville, Ky.

More than 20 years ago, Tom Underwood, a longtime lobbyist who works for The Rotunda Group, was quoted in a Herald-Leader story. At the time, he was referred to as spokesman for the Kentucky Fire Sprinkler Contractors Association, a lobbying contract he still holds today.

"Which would you rather do," he asked. "Meet with friends after work and have a nice, informal chat over drinks? Or try to talk to someone in the middle of the work day, when the phones are ringing and everyone is tugging on their sleeve for their attention?"

That holds true 20 years later, he said.

"It'd be the same if I were selling widgets in a corporate world. If I'm going to meet with a customer, I'll do better when I've got his full attention," Underwood said this year.

Rep. Josh Calloway, R-Irvington, one of Frankfort's most vocal social conservatives, said it's "pretty evident" the events work for lobbyists.

He described their effect as less of a quid pro quo and more setting up a social dynamic that leads people-pleasing legislators to seek approval from their often highly compensated lobbyist friends.

"Some people do things driven by that desire to fit in, to be liked, to be a part of whatever the group considered elite or privileged is doing," Calloway said. "Sometimes it affects it not based on 'You bought me a beer and I feel beholden because you bought me a beer.'"

"It's more, 'I feel beholden because I want you to like me and I want you to feel like I hold some kind of power that you need.'"

He believes that dynamic was at play during the passage of the bourbon barrel tax bill, which is, to the chagrin of local governments home to massive distilleries, phasing out property taxes on the valuable barrels.

The Herald-Leader requested entry at two high-dollar reception events during the 2025 legislative session but was denied: The Buffalo Trace Distillery reception held at the bourbon-maker's charming Elmer T. Lee Clubhouse and the "Energizing EKY Legislative Reception" hosted by the Eastern Kentucky region's primary power providers at the downtown Frankfort venue The Foundry.

Not all events are equal, though, and many are far less swanky.

On the same afternoon as the distillery and

power company receptions, the Bosnians of Bowling Green had booked a room in the Capitol Annex, serving up Jimmy John's sandwiches while talking to legislators about their community. Rep. Steve Bratcher, R-Elizabethtown, recalled his time coming to the aid of Bosnians during the armed conflict there in the 1990s.

Event organizer Adela Muhic told the Herald-Leader that Bosnian immigrants make up about 10% of Warren County and a large portion of the growing logistics industry. The event served dual purposes: to let the state's powerful know that the 10,000-odd Bosnian community is thriving and to inform them of the Balkan nation's conflict-ridden history.

"I hope this just leads to greater awareness of what we've gone through, and we can educate others on what happened and how to prevent it happening in the future," Muhic said.

With a little over a dozen legislators there, the event was lightly attended. It begged the question of how many of the other lawmakers were sipping old fashioned at Buffalo Trace or mingling with the state's power executives downtown.

Some events have become solidly embedded in the culture of Frankfort. That's true for the breakfast held in the Capitol Annex cafeteria by the Kentucky State Police Professional Association every Friday.

State police and their respective unions are seen as among the most valued interest groups in Frankfort politics. Rarely do politicians speak ill of the KSP, which provides security for the legislature and governor.

Like McCarthy's event, the gathering provides a space for legislators to speak freely.

This March, Sen. Robin Webb, R-Grayson, jokingly chided Kentucky League of Cities Executive Director and CEO J.D. Chaney about a bill he supported — city law enforcement often lobby through his organization — that would have opened a large loophole for police departments to deny more open records requests.

"This is not about protecting bad officers," Chaney shot back in a friendly tone over his plate of bacon and eggs.

The bill was weakened to shrink the loophole that day, and went on to become law.

FROM PAGE 4A

LOBBYING

Calloway, R-Irvington, said.

FOOD, DRINK AND PER DIEM

Underwood, the veteran lobbyist, started a new tradition this legislative session: the "Chick-Fil-A scoreboard."

He and friends kept a running list of how many lobbying events were entered by the famous Christian, peanut-oil-fried chicken eatery. They set a betting line to start the year at 26.

"I bet the under, and I lost," Underwood said. The final figure ended up being in the high 20s.

That's about one-quarter of the 104 events serving some amount of food that took place on lobbying interests' dime this past 30-day legislative session, according to several copies of the legislature's social calendar.

In most legislative sessions, much of the hard work takes place Tuesday through Thursday when the General Assembly tackles full days of committee meetings and constituent services in the annex as well as votes and debates on the legislative

floor in the Capitol.

If a legislator took advantage of every free food opportunity during Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays in the 2025 session, they would have only had to pay for 15 meals. Free food was available at 80% — or 61 meals — of the breakfasts, lunches and dinners during those days.

In the 2024 session, where there were 60 legislative days as opposed to 30, that figure was 55% of all meals.

Open meal slots are so scarce that groups looking to get legislators to attend their events hawkishly watch the calendar updates, distributed routinely on a Frankfort email list, for an open spot.

Al Cross, a longtime Kentucky political journalist who hosted an event for the Bluegrass region chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists late in the session this year, told the Herald-Leader he moved quickly to fill up a rare free dinner spot that opened up in March.

The free meals offer a pretty good deal for the legislators. They bring in about \$74,000 in total compensation per year for their part-time work, which includes mileage reimbursement for commutes, according to re-

ports obtained through the Legislative Research Commission.

If they take advantage of those meals, they're able to pocket more of their per diem expenses designated for legislative sessions — paid without lawmakers having to submit receipts or expense reports — which stood at \$19,173 per legislator last year.

More often than not, they don't have to go far and they don't have to pay anything to catch a lunch in between meetings or a relaxed dinner after a long day in the Capitol.

Legislators clearly appreciate these meals.

But the jury is out on if they work to sway opinions, according to Westerfield, the former senator.

He added that he rarely retained any information on who was sponsoring the event he grabbed a sandwich from.

"I appreciated it because it saved me money," Westerfield said. "There's no value to that other than me getting a lunch to feed my hungry stomach."

BETTER THAN BEFORE?
Though the money spent on feeding and entertaining the crop of legislators is abnormally high, veterans of the Frankfort scene

still conclude that this system is better than before.

BOPROT, a FBI inquiry into bribery and corruption among state legislators and the lobbying corps led to convictions for more than a dozen legislators between 1992 and 1995.

It was also a turning point for ethics in Kentucky. The scandal led to the creation of the Legislative Ethics Commission and a strict ethics code.

John Schaff, former executive director of the commission, literally wrote the book on BOPROT and various other Kentucky political scandals.

"Before the ethics law, there were really not many rules," Schaff said. "Lobbyists were able to, for example, take legislators on out-of-state trips and pay for everything on that trip, and that was one of the ways they built relationships."

"But when the ethics law was adopted after BOPROT, it prohibited those trips, made them report everything and it required that to hold one of an event, lobbyists had to invite large groups of legislators."

Cross, who began covering legislative sessions in 1980, sees the improvements from yesterday.

But he's not so sure it's improved drastically given the events exception and the vast amount of money in political campaigns.

"Before BOPROT, it was fairly typical for legislators to go to (the Frankfort bar) Flynn's and have lobbyists pick up their tab. Now, the events exception is probably the broadest exception that you have because legislators are once again able to get free food and alcohol," Cross said.

"You can't legislate human nature and you can't legislate morality. The current system is better than the old system, but not by that much."

Marzian, who began her legislative career just as the BOPROT scandal broke, said the legislator gatherings used to be "so strict" and pared down.

"As the years went by, things got looser and looser and looser. Instead of hot dog weenies on a bun, you'd see shrimp," Marzian said. "I don't want to stand there for two hours for a drink, but that's how they get access to you."

"There's a reason that goes on in Washington and here in Frankfort."