

## Birmingham News (AL)

### CALERA DEBATES NEED FOR LOBBYIST PONDERES IF ONE COULD GET MONEY FOR BYPASS

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When the City of Birmingham needed help securing flights to the city directly from Washington, D.C., leaders called their lobbyist - and got what they wanted.

Calera Mayor George Roy hopes his city can get similar results by hiring a lobbyist to help secure \$10 million to construct a downtown bypass. Officials say the road is essential in restoring activity in the city's old commercial center.

"By getting somebody that has done this work before, they know where to start," Roy said. "We've got to do our share to do the work, but we've got to have someone direct us in the right direction."

It's not unusual for cities to employ lobbyists to push for federal and state dollars, but it's less common among cities Calera's size, said Ed LaMonte, political science professor at Birmingham-Southern College.

Sometimes the tactic works and sometimes it doesn't, political insiders said. Lobbying is most effective, they said, when cities also can demonstrate that the project is important to ordinary voters, not just city officials.

"It is very common practice for municipalities to believe they cannot get their fair share of funds unless they have a paid representative," LaMonte said.

Roy said it's the small municipalities that need representation the most as they compete for attention in Washington.

A city-commissioned study suggested building a bypass to reroute heavy industrial traffic away from downtown Calera. Engineers recommended a northern bypass that would turn off U.S. 31 just north of downtown and tie back into Alabama 25 west of downtown.

Roy's call for a lobbyist follows his March trip to Washington, D.C., for a meeting of the National League of Cities. During the trip, Roy discussed the bypass proposal with Sens. Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions and Rep. Spencer Bachus.

LaMonte said governments hire lobbyists either to accomplish a particular goal or as longterm representatives.

"There are almost as many examples of this as there are cities," he said.

LaMonte said choosing the right lobbyist is paramount. And he said governments should be under no illusion that lobbyists always provide instant results.

"There is no clear example of it always being worth the investment," he said. "You can find as many examples of these relationships being terminated after a period of time because the hiring municipality doesn't get its money's worth."

While lobbyists can bring successful results to their municipal clients, political insiders caution

against putting the fate of an agenda solely in the hands of a hired representative.

Securing a lobbyist is a major step in a longer process, said Amy Showalter, a Cincinnati-based consultant. "We find this is usually the first step organizations take when they want to influence the political process," Showalter said. "It's very acceptable, but the progressive organizations have a very effective grass-roots organization behind that lobbyist as well."

Showalter, who heads The Showalter Group, said effective campaigns require several steps that stress the importance of a project to elected officials.

"What they need to do is get some real citizens behind the cause," she said. "This is what lawmakers look for when they make appropriations decisions."

Showalter said city leaders are wise to show their faces when voicing their concerns. Lawmakers need to see real people and hear stories of why money is needed, rather than merely being inundated with sterile e-mail and faxes, she said.

Former U.S. Sen. Howell Heflin said several factors go into granting constituents' requests, and lobbyists can help.

"A lobbyist can follow things a lot better because most congressional offices are short-handed, and they're as busy as they can be," he said. "Somebody on the scene constantly can be helpful under certain circumstances."

Heflin placed grass-roots support among the most important elements in gaining lawmakers' attention. Lobbyists might help in presenting an issue, but lawmakers are most interested in legislation they know voters back home care about, he said.

"It's a mixture," Heflin said. "You pay attention to the local folks. They vote for you, whereas the lobbyist doesn't."

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