

ROLL CALL

After the Scandal, Some Lobbyists Go Back to the Classroom

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If Jack Abramoff personifies K Street for most people, the lobbying industry's image is grim. The convicted former lobbyist has been called a crook, a scoundrel, a con man. One GOP lawmaker even said he wished Abramoff had never been born.

It was in this environment that 65 lobbyists pulled out their pens, straightened their posture and went back to school. Well, sort of.

On Monday, the American League of Lobbyists offered its second installment of a 14-part lobbying certification program, held at the American Trucking Associations' Capitol Hill office. ALL is sponsoring the program in conjunction with George Mason University.

Lobbyists who complete 11 sessions will be able to display a certificate indicating their proficiency in the core requirements — the basics of lobbying ethics and of the legislative process — as well as knowledge from a number of elective courses.

The certification program was not established solely in response to the Abramoff lobbying scandal. But a sampling of attendees suggested that the harsh environment helped motivate interest and attendance.

Lisa Kinard, a lobbyist with Goodwill Industries and one-time Congressional aide, said she considers the ALL program to be an opportunity for continuing education — worth doing, given the Abramoff scandal.

Christina McWilson, a law student from New York, flew in just for the seminar. She came directly from the airport and planned to fly back the same day. Though McWilson previously worked at the American Chemistry Council, she still considers herself a novice about legislative lingo.

"I wasn't sure, at first, what they meant when they were talking about whipping," she admitted. "You get that it's OK to be green and to get a little deeper understanding with some of the aspects of the process."

McWilson, who plans to graduate from the Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in May, said she is also taking the certification program for the networking opportunities and the insider tips it affords.

ALL President Paul Miller, who helped conceive and organize the program, reminded the audience that the image woes of lobbyists, while especially dire right now, are not new. When he told his mother 10 years ago that he was going into "government relations," she said, "Oh, you're the guy who takes the bags of money to Members of Congress!"

Miller, it's clear, knows it's going to take a lot more than a piece of paper to change that kind of sentiment.

His group assembled a panel of Congressional and lobbying experts to talk about "Legislative Basics — Knowing the Rules of the Road." And, as expected, the issues breezily morphed into discussions about earmark reform and lobby law overhauls.

Panelist Robert Dove, a former Senate Parliamentarian who is now with the law and lobbying firm Patton Boggs, winkingly deflected the question of earmark reform to a higher power.

"Check with the chaplain," he said. "He's closer to God."

Consensus on the panel — which also included Larry Halloran, staff director for the House national security subcommittee; Peter Mayberry, president of Mayberry & Associates; Mildred Webber, deputy chief of staff to House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Mo.); and Howard Marlowe of Marlowe & Co. — was that earmarks get Members reelected and that, while reforms may be coming, earmarks aren't likely to disappear.

"My boss thinks there's nothing wrong with earmarks" in general, Webber said. "Members know what's important in their district. Not to say there isn't need for reform."

Dove told the audience that anyone who is against lobbying reform ought to send Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) a thank you note, because his amendment on the Dubai ports deal last week shunted the legislation off the fast track.

"Last week, I would have said, it goes through like greased lightning," he said. Now, he said, it's not as clear. "The atmospherics are changing."

Webber added, "A lot of Members have said, 'Abramoff was caught and the system worked. And whatever Congress does, it will be a one-day story.'" But the new regulations and rules will endure much longer than one day, she said.

The attendees got more than analysis on reforms of their industry. Mayberry gave a 10-minute presentation, complete with a handwritten chart about how a bill becomes a law. And Marlowe gave a primer on the appropriations process and tips about how to be a successful lobbyist.

Marlowe, whose firm specializes in getting earmarks for state and local government entities, recommended that, when meeting with Members and aides, a good lobbyist be prepared, be brief and be gone.

"The most important characteristic in an effective lobbyist is an ability to listen," he said, as the room full of pupils, especially the younger ones, took copious notes.

The audience questions ranged from banal to quirky. One question from the back of the room: How can you get a zoned-out Congressional staffer to return focus on your client presentation? Marlowe suggested that sometimes you ought to just bail out on the meeting if there's no hope of re-engaging the staffer.

Marlowe also gave pointers on how a lobbyist should go about submitting appropriations requests. He included handouts with examples of request letters and forms from his own clients, such as the city of Norfolk, Va.

There's only so much a lobbyist can do on paper, he said.

"Bringing things to life with subcommittee staff is very important," he said. "It's compelling. That's your job. You've got to sell it on the merits."

Melissa Matson, an account executive at Golin/Harris for 17 months and a former Senate staff assistant, said she found the discussions on parliamentary rules and the budget process especially helpful.

"I think a lot of people, not just the younger ones like me, could use a refresher course," she said.

Matson's firm is encouraging all of its lobbyists to complete the certification and is paying their tuition — \$105 for ALL members and \$205 for nonmembers for each course.

Gina Bancroft, an ALL board member and a veteran lobbyist at EDS, said she plans to complete the certification process because it adds a sense of legitimacy to her profession.

"I think it's critical we're doing this," she said, adding that she hadn't really learned anything new in Monday's session "because I'm old."