

Lobbyists from all over

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

The Blaine County School District split deeply – the board’s vote was 3-2 – when it came to deciding whether to hire a lobbyist to represent it at the next state legislative session in Boise.

The vote went in the “yea” direction, with the support of the superintendent, who noted that such vital matters as the school funding formula, which determines how state money will be apportioned to the districts, already have been under discussion. The person hired was Phil Homer, who has been a lobbyist before, working for the Idaho Association of School Administrators.

Blaine is so far the only individual school district to take this step, and there’s been some commentary about whether it should. (There are also questions about whether various other governmental organizations, local and state, should hire lobbyists. But it wouldn’t be a surprise to see other school districts consider it. A lot of lobbyists prowl the Statehouse in-season, more of them than there are legislators. And they represent some fairly unexpected interests and organizations.

You can see the most current list for yourself (dated November 16) on the secretary of state’s website at <https://www.sos.idaho.gov/elect/lobbyist/2016/emplob.pdf>. As you look at it, remind yourself that this is the Idaho Legislature, not Congress.

Plenty of local Idaho organizations are represented on the list, of course: The list includes the Associated General Contractors of Idaho and the Association of Idaho Cities, the Boise Chamber of Commerce and the Catholic Charities of Idaho (yes, charities hire lobbyists too), the College of Western Idaho, the Flying B Ranch, Idaho Power Company and the J.R. Simplot Company, the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District, Micron Technology and Melaleuca Inc., St. Luke’s Health System, the Idaho Farm Bureau and the Idaho Freedom Foundation. Nearly every organization of substantial size in the Gem State has someone at the Statehouse looking out for them.

But they’re not alone. Remember, a number of these and other organizations also are connected to national counterpart organizations. Some of them designate staffers as lobbyists, and others hire contract lobbyists; the mix changes periodically.

None of these should come as a surprise. But you may be interested in some of the national names that seem to find it worthwhile to spend money on Idaho lobbying.

There’s Wilks Ranch Idaho LLC, for instance, based out of Cisco, Texas, but recently a big landowner in Idaho.

There are many more, large and not so large. Wal-Mart has a designated lobbyist for Idaho. So does Verizon Wireless, T-Mobile, Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company, United Parcel Service, Uber Technologies (of San Francisco), Johnson & Johnson, Two Jinn Inc. (Aladdin Bail Bonds), Chevron USA, K12 (an education company), the Humane Society of the United States, Scion Dental, Pfizer Inc. (one of the world’s biggest pharma companies), MillerCoots LLC, Bayer Corporation and even the Bank of New York Mellon.

And many more.

What have they all to do with Idaho? What do they want, or not want, in or from the Gem State? And how might that relate to you?

Good questions, and not just for the Blaine County School District.

Lobbyists often get tagged as nefarious actors and that's generally unfair. We all have a right to seek redress of grievances, whether directly or through someone paid to help us. And bear in mind that lobbyists are not a monolith; they often do battle with each other. Will their work benefit the rest of us, or not? The answer to that will depend on where you sit.

The next session begins in a couple of weeks.