

What Do Lobbyists Do?

Mike Lennen: At the outset, I should indicate, Pat, my first governmental interaction that I recall with you occurred in either late 1979 or early 1980, and that was at a time when the state was dealing with the property tax requirements for railroads that had been adopted in comprehensive federal legislation. The legislation was referred to, as you know, as the 4R Act, to be precise, the Railroad Revitalization Regulatory Reform Act. I was working with the Revenue Departmentⁱ, and Pat was a, or maybe the, governmental regulations representative for the railroads. Our issue had to do with the valuation and assessment of property taxes on railroads, and there was a difference between the federal mandate and the 4R Act, and the approach that had developed for state taxation.

Not surprisingly, we were on opposite sides of the issue, but one of the things I still remember and I've always appreciated was that Pat was an effective, persuasive, informed, and unfailingly civil advocate for his railroad clients

The focus of today's interview is your work and experience as a legislative agent or lobbyist, primarily for the railroads in Kansas, others as well. But before we get to that, could you provide just a bit of personal background, where you were born, where you grew up, where you went to school, any interesting things, like your discussion about walking through the Capitol building every day.

Pat Hubbell: Well, I grew up in Topeka, born here. I went to Holy Name, which is a parochial school just west of the Capitol and graduated from Washburn. I went into the Army, came back to the Reserves, started lobbying in—I'm trying to think now—1969. I was working for a guy named Otto Schnellbacher. He was a great friend. I was selling insurance and became very aware that I wasn't a very good insurance salesman. I'd be better doing something else.

ML: You're being modest.

PH: Well, there were a lot of times I walked out and I thought, "I did a good job of selling, but I don't think they can afford it." I had a chance to go to work for the Beer Wholesalers as a lobbyist. I kind of started there. A very good friend of mine passed away who was the lobbyist in Washington and also here at the Capitol along with three other railroad lobbyists. He suddenly passed. They called me and asked me to come and meet with them, and I started working with them back during the railroad dereg [deregulation] days, and as my wife will tell you, I went back and forth [to Washington DC] right off the job, twelve, thirteen weeks in a row on railroad legislationⁱⁱ simply because we had the ranking minority members on both the House and the Senate committees. So, most of the time, the bill was in conference, back and forth, trying to keep track of it.

That was kind of my baptism into railroading. Again, members of my family all worked for the railroad over the years, but that's basically how I got started over there.

ML: So you began with Beer Wholesalers?

PH: Yes.

It gave me the exposure that I needed from two different angles to lobby and to try to represent people. The railroad was good enough one year. My wife will remember this. They sent me to the University of Southern California, to charm school. It was really a development thing more on public speaking, getting up in front of groups talking and representing people. There were thirty of us, and it was a cross-section of people from the railroad in the class. It was probably one of the real eye-opening things for me to get a better understanding of the entire industry because we had some people from all aspects. That's kind of what led the whole thing to where we are today.

ML: It would be fair to say that your work for the railroads at least was not limited at all to Kansas, but during the period of the 4R Act, you spent a lot of time with Congress.

ML: You were definitely an effective lobbyist in Washington.

PH: It was a trying time. You had the bankruptcy of Rock Island, which had a big effect here in Kansas. You had the Conrail thing back on the East Coast and in the New England area, New York area with New York Central, Penn Central. There was a lot going on, whether the industry would survive, or it would totally collapse because the other railroads in the West depended on traffic from those failing railroads.

So, it was not only a job, it was a mission to try to save an industry. People like [Senators] Dole and Pearson played big roles in that and were leaders in trying to keep the thing going. They realized, at least we felt like they realized how important the industry was, especially to Kansas with agricultural products and all the things that we transport here—coal. It became a desperate time but ended up with the way that 4R and everything else was written, the industry survived, and it thrives today.

ML: Pat, you've been directly involved in the legislative process for fifty or more years. During that time, what changes have you noticed, observed in the process, how lobbyists interact with legislators, legislators interact among themselves, whether divisions are sharper, more pronounced? Just how you go about lobbying, has that changed over time, or is it similar?

PH: I ran a hospitality room at the Jayhawk Hotel. If I remember right when I started lobbying for the Beer Wholesalers, there were eighty-four legislators living in the Jayhawk. I had a hospitality room on the fourth floor, and I could just line out the other rooms. You'd get off the elevator, and you had the ag room, which had all kinds of fruit—every healthy food product you'd want, soft drinks. Then the next room was the KP&L room, the Kansas Power & Light. Then the next room was the contractors, and across the hall was me. We specialized in Bloody Marys, and we got fifty copies of the State Journal every afternoon and set it by our door. So, the people living at the hotel—that's when we had an afternoon newspaper.

But then all that changed. It's changed for the better. Those rooms were—at least those people didn't go out and drive on the streets and that type of thing. They just went to their room. But it required a lot of work on the part of the people in my line [of work]. You'd have a hearing at

8:00 in the morning, and you'd lock your hospitality room up at 8:00, 9:00 at night and maybe go across the street and have a steak at the Elks Club. I appreciated closing them down.

ML: Your thoughts or your observations about the conduct of lobbyists or the qualities that lobbyists have? What sort of things really contribute to a lobbyist's effectiveness and longevity as you have experienced?

PH: I think #1 is not wasting your time. It takes some time to go to somebody that you're lobbying for, the client, and say, "Hey, let's don't do this bill. We're wasting our time. Let's do something administratively or file a court action. Let's don't make the legislature the first place we go. Let's talk to the administration. Let's talk to"—I'm basically on the state level. I think that you can solve a lot of problems by changing a rule or a reg [regulation] that's got some aggravation than always going to the legislature just because you have a lobbyist.

I sense that the legislature is more—they have more material, more ability to analyze things than they had in the past, besides the research staff. Besides the staff within agencies that cover the Capitol. It's obviously much bigger than it used to be. I just think you get things worked out a lot quicker now than you used to.

ML: Does it make any difference in terms of effectiveness whether a lobbyist is working for a single organization like the railroads or has a diverse clientele base or somebody employed by an interest group like the Kansas Policy Institute or the Sierra Club or somebody that's representing a business focus like the Internal Legislative Representative for Evergy or not?

PH: I'd be talking against the way I have mine going, but I don't see a lot of interplay between clients, but you've got to watch out for that. You've got to make sure that you're not putting one ahead of the other without at least informing them, "Hey, I'm going to do this for So and So. Do you have a problem with it?"

I think it's just an information thing. I really haven't fallen into a situation where there's a conflict between my clients and certain legislative deals.

I just think that the #1 thing you do as a lobbyist, convince who you're lobbying for that what they want has to go to the legislature or can be resolved some other way. Just the fact that you have a lobbyist doesn't mean you ought to be taking a bill every session to the legislature.

ML: That's excellent. Certainly your career reflects substantive activities.

[End of File]

ⁱ Lennen was Secretary of Revenue, and later, Chair of the Kansas Corporation Commission.

ⁱⁱ Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act