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## BILL VIRGIN

Tuesday, January 28, 2003

## Clout in Olympia -- who's got it?



By [BILL VIRGIN](#)  
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER COLUMNIST

Consider the plight of the lobbyists as they trudge the marble corridors of Olympia in this contentious legislative session.

Or don't consider it a plight. After all, there are more worthy causes on which to expend your reservoirs of sympathy. And those lobbyists are not trudging marble corridors, not this year anyway. Instead they're congregating in a tent outside the temporary buildings that serve as the Legislature's quarters while its domed home has its earthquake damage repaired.

But even the most unsympathetic would have to concede the stark contrast in the life of the Olympia lobbyist compared with three years ago.

Life was much easier in a time of billion-dollar surpluses. Legislators were much more receptive to a new idea or program that could be slipped oh so discreetly into a bill, all to make some constituency happy.

No one is looking to make anyone happy today. Not only is there no receptiveness, much less any money, for new programs, but legislators looking for some way to close a huge budget gap are far more tempted to look at the programs already in place, and their eyes might just fall on that plum that a lobbyist oh so meticulously got enacted a few years ago.

In a climate like that, who gets listened to?

Some constituencies get a voice simply from the ability to muster large numbers of people in Olympia to tell legislators directly what they want -- teachers and public employees being the most notable examples.

Business lobbyists have a trickier situation. Their members can't readily rally on the lawns of Olympia for a telegenic demonstration -- they've got businesses to run. And while those businesses may represent thousands of employees, the interests of those employees and of business don't necessarily coincide. In fact, as we'll see, business interests themselves aren't monolithic. What I want may be something that comes out of your hide.

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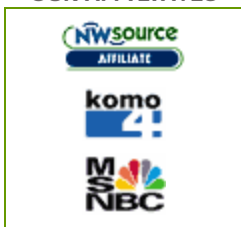
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So which business groups command attention -- and why? I asked three veteran members of the Washington Senate, on background so they could speak candidly.

"The ones that get listened to are the ones that provide a lot of jobs in my district, or in the region," says one senator. Sheer numbers alone don't cut it, the senator adds. While they don't have to be social activists, they do "have to do a responsible job and are going to be a stable source of employment. Good citizens."

Another senator lists the two major business groups -- the Association of Washington Business and the small-business-oriented National Federation of Independent Business, as well as some smaller groups such as the Washington Farm Bureau ("They've gained a lot in the last few years.").

One group that comes in for special mention is the Building Industry Association. "The builders are a strong group; they've got good people and when they take an interest in an issue, they go full out."

And sometimes going full out means knowing legislative battles are not won or lost solely in Olympia. When other business groups successfully lobbied the Legislature to change the unemployment compensation taxes paid by various industry classifications, the builders did not sit around and sulk because they felt the burden had been shifted to them. Instead they went out and circulated petitions, got Referendum 53 on last November's ballot, got voters to repeal the increases and recently won a state Supreme Court decision upholding the validity of the referendum.

"Boeing got outmaneuvered politically by the builders," the senator says.

Which brings us to the entity many have viewed as Washington's shadow government. Those of us who have followed legislative dealings in other states have noted the fact that Boeing has traditionally operated with a much lower profile than dominant industries or companies elsewhere, spending its political capital frugally on select issues it deemed of real importance to its interests (taxes being primary among those).

Not that Boeing wasn't willing to play hard ball on those issues it deemed important, or to go after those candidates or incumbents it deemed obstacles to those interests. But rather than using that influence as a very public cudgel, says one senator who both represents many of the company's workers and has on occasion run afoul of the company, "Boeing always worked in a very subtle way."

And Boeing's influence today? "I don't think they carry as much influence," the senator says.

The natural conclusion to draw is that Boeing's decision to relocate its corporate headquarters from Seattle to Chicago is the reason for that decline in influence. Natural -- but perhaps not the full story. "I don't think it's the headquarters," the senator says. "I see buildings torn down and not replaced. It's not as if they have a commitment to the area." Says another, "So many jobs have been lost."

But a third senator wonders whether Boeing's influence really has waned. From talking to constituents (many of whom still refer to the airplane

maker as Boeing's ) while doorbelling, the senator gets the impression "they don't see it as an Illinois company." If Boeing's influence has eroded at all, the senator adds, it may be not so much a shift in headquarters as a shift in Washington's political landscape, particularly with a sort of anti-establishment streak among the Republicans on issues like the gas tax. Boeing, the senator says, is seen as part of that establishment.

Boeing may still retain considerable clout as a business interest in Olympia if for no other reason than default; a downsized Boeing is still a considerable employment base, and no one else seems to have the same size or clout. How about the software behemoth of Redmond? "In the past Microsoft had no presence in Olympia and people wondered why," says one senator. Adds another, "They're more of a presence but they don't do a hard sell like Boeing."

In the midst of all this, the poor employee or entrepreneur may be wondering "hey, who listens to me? Do I get a voice if it's not through some association?"

At the risk of sounding like an innocent, cynicism-free page from a high school civics textbook, the answer is yes, at least according to one senator. "The best lobbyist is a constituent," the senator says, and the advent of e-mail has given that constituent more leverage to be heard. "I get 100 mails a day; people are learning you don't just sign a form letter," but instead personalize the message to describe how a piece of legislation affects that person's life or livelihood.

Legislative bodies are best designed for defensive measures, for blocking rather than enacting, one senator notes. At no time will that be more true than in the current legislative session, when the best many business groups can hope for is to avoid being the subject of someone's "revenue enhancement" maneuver. By the end of this session we'll have a much clearer picture of who has real clout, as opposed to paper or numerical clout.

Unlike three years ago, the lobbyists charged with exercising that clout will have to prove it not by how much or what they won -- but by how much or what they didn't lose.

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