



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB0292
Public Integrity Act

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart

January 21, 2020 • Environment and Transportation Committee

What the Bill Does

HB292 seeks to level the playing field between lobbyists for large, moneyed interests and advocates for everyone else. First, the bill would limit the amount that lobbyists can spend at so-called “committee dinners” to \$50 per legislator. Second, the bill increases the lobbyist registration fee from \$100 to \$300, but creates a fee waiver for lobbyists representing non-profit groups.

Why the Bill Matters

First, committee dinners serve valid purposes. They provide legislators opportunities to bond with each other, hear from constituents, and discuss complex issues. They, of course, provide valuable access to lobbyists, whose clients are willing to pay large sums to spend a few hours socializing with legislators. However, non-profits, grassroots groups, and individuals are denied similar access because they simply cannot afford it. Instead, they try to steal five minutes of legislators’ time in a crowded reception room over cold sandwiches. This bill would level the playing field between these two groups. The amount of money that an advocate or lobbyists has shouldn’t determine their amount of access or the volume of their voice.

In 1999, the Maryland General Assembly banned the practice of lobbyists buying dinner for legislators in a one-on-one setting. [But by 2001](#), Speaker Cas Taylor, then-Congressman Ben Cardin and Senate President Mike Miller were expressing regrets about allowing the committee dinner loophole. They claimed the dinners were a perversion of the 1999 ethics law and that they “violated the spirit of the law.” The law was designed to address a perception that lobbyists were using their expense accounts to win legislative victories. The theory behind the committee dinner exception was that it would give groups “an opportunity to explain complex issues to the relevant committees in a

relaxed setting.” Senator Cardin said he would be “very concerned about a private dinner in a restaurant with a small number of legislators and no business being talked about.” Speaker Taylor said the intent of the ethics law was not to allow legislators to socialize in private on a lobbyist’s tab. He said, “They should be working dinners.”

Second, increasing the lobbyist registration fee is long overdue. It hasn’t been updated for inflation for years, and funds both the State Ethics Commission and the state’s public campaign financing fund. The State Ethics Commission performs virtual work, yet is chronically underfunded. It has already faced budget cuts in the aftermath of the pandemic. Raising the registration fee while providing a fee waiver will provide needed funding during a tough budgetary climate.

Why the Committee Should Vote Favorably

No matter how many legislators attend a dinner, lobbyists are undeniably paying for access. And even if no legislator changes their vote based on a steak, the committee dinner practice creates at least a perception of unequal access and power. We cap tangible gifts from lobbyists for that exact reason, yet committee dinners remain the only uncapped gift in our ethics code.

HB292 will realign these dinners with the spirit of the 1999 ethics laws. Our conversations with advocates should revolve around legislative substance, not the tenderness of the filet mignon. I urge a favorable report.