



# THE INFLUENCE GAME: Lobbyists work stimulus to end

**THE INFLUENCE GAME: Lobbyists protect their turf on stimulus bill as endgame draws near**

ALAN FRAM Associated Press Writer

AP

Whether protecting school aid or seeking tax breaks for imported shoes, lobbyists are amping up their efforts to shape Congress' giant stimulus bill when it counts: as the measure nears its endgame.

President Barack Obama and Democratic Senate leaders were under pressure Friday to trim the final bill's size, leaving interest groups and companies scrambling to defend turf they had claimed earlier. Lawmakers hope to forge a compromise next week between the House's \$819 billion package and the even larger version the Senate was struggling to complete.

Amid talk that tens of billions in state and local school aid might be cut to secure needed Senate votes, lobbyists from the education world and public employee unions were seeking late audiences with lawmakers and their aides and telephoning Senate offices, continuing an effort they started last week when they heard the money might be on the chopping block.

"Our issue is simply to protect what has been proposed" in the bill, said Deborah Rigsby, president of the Committee for Education Funding, a coalition of groups representing everybody from school district officials to textbook publishers. The Senate bill — similar to the House's — has \$79 billion in state education aid, plus tens of billions more for school construction, student loans and other initiatives.

The eleventh-hour drive illustrated how time never runs out on lobbying until the president signs a measure into law. Though the circle of people making final decisions on the compromise bill will be small, others will seek last-minute changes until the very end.

"It's far more probable to be reshaped" in final negotiations, said R. Bruce Josten, chief lobbyist for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which would like to see more business tax cuts added to the legislation. "Yes, we'll make every effort to influence this package."

The emergency bill, aimed at steadying the wobbly economy, is laden with spending for public works construction, schools, health care, aid to state and local governments and benefits for the poor, as well as tax cuts for workers, home buyers and businesses. Lobbyists for virtually every conceivable interest have tried shaping the measure, lured by its enormous size and scope, its must-pass status and a sense that budget pressures will make federal dollars scarcer in legislation later this year.

"This is a bill that's got just about as much room as you need," said Steve Verdier, top lobbyist for the Independent Community Bankers of America, which successfully supported expanded tax credits for home buyers and other provisions it said would help create jobs. "So if you've got some ideas you've been trying to push for a number of years, this is certainly the vehicle you want to use."

As a result, congressional office buildings have been teeming with lobbyists in recent days. Even governors have come: Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour visited his state's senior senator, Republican Thad Cochran, to press for infrastructure funds.

"It felt like rush hour the last three weeks. The halls are packed," said Rhone Resch, president of the Solar Energy Industries Association, which wants lawmakers to convert an existing tax credit for solar energy equipment into federal grants to companies in hopes of spurring sales.

Labor unions were still trying to nail down language Friday encouraging high wages on federal construction projects and increased training funds for workers who have lost jobs due to foreign competition.

The footwear industry was trying to eliminate duties on many imported shoes, which comprise nearly all shoes sold in the U.S. Kevin Burke, president of the American Apparel and Footwear Association, said his organization had retained one of Washington's big-name lobbyists, Ken Duberstein, former chief of staff to President Ronald Reagan, but had so far hit a brick wall.

"There were a million and one other priorities members were going after, and they accepted very few amendments," said Burke, who said his efforts would continue. "We still have plenty of shots at the apple on this thing."

The home furnishing and building products industries, working with lobbyists from Winston & Strawn LLP, were pushing for temporary tax credits for low- and middle-income families purchasing such goods.

"We're in line with the others," said Dick Doyle, president of the International Sleep Products Association. "We haven't been thrown out the door yet."

Some, though, were ready to postpone their battles.

The house construction industry declared victory when the Senate voted to double the size of a tax credit for many home buyers to \$15,000. But senators rejected a Republican plan for the government to temporarily subsidize lower mortgage rates, another priority of builders.

"It's probably dead in the water right now," said Jerry Howard, head of the National Association of Home Builders. But he said the effort would continue when Obama announces a housing package in coming days, "So we really just shifted our focus."

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/183536>

---

© 2009