February 3, 2015

Leadership Shakeup Could Fuel Clout Shuffle at Pink Granite Statehouse with Tea Party Tint

Professional Advocacy Association of Texas

Allen Blakemore routinely tells people that he’s “living the dream” when they began conversations with the standard questions about how the dream that’s been under way for the past several months is for.

Blakemore is one in a sizeable group of Republican campaign consultants who’ve been moonlighting as lobbyists in between election years since the GOP completed its Lone Star State takeover by capturing a Texas House majority a dozen years ago for the first time since 1977. But Blakemore should be finding his services in be in record demand now as a seasonal public affairs advocate as a result of the close relationship that he has with Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick after guiding him to victory at the polls last year in a race that he’d entered as a significant underdog.

At a time when the Austin lobby is experiencing an unprecedented infusion of new talent in the wake of the biggest turnover ever here among elected state officials, Blakemore has skyrocketed into the upper echelons of the hired guns rankings on the Capitol Insider Texas Lobby Power Rankings chart.

While Blakemore is the only consultant in the top 10 on the list of contract lobbyists at the statehouse in the early stages of the 84th regular session, he’s the only member of that elite club whose rating is based on future power potential as opposed to established reputation and record of success. But Blakemore is the prime example of a much larger group of public affairs professionals who can expect a substantial bump in sway thanks to connections with newly-minted Governor Greg Abbott, Patrick and the other members in a statewide legislative leadership that’s been overhaul completely for the first time in Texas in two dozen years.

The higher stock values that experienced and neophyte lobbyists with ties to the state’s top two new leaders will enjoy as 2015 unfolds will come at some expense to the lobbying professionals who’ve been the biggest beneficiaries of Republican Rick Perry’s historic run as the longest-serving governor in Texas history.

Lobbyists who’ve prospered considerably as allies of Perry or Patrick’s predecessor or both’s brother the challenge of adapting to the new dynamics that will be at play with the passing of the torches inside a beltway where everything had seemed to be constantly changing except the leadership hierarchy and the look the legislators in general have had on state government for more than a decade. The election season from which the new governor and lieutenant governor emerged triumphantly also produced a more conservative Legislature that will complicate the business of lobbying for the professional advocates who’d been at their best when Democrats were still running the show.

The regular session that got under way about three weeks ago will be a test of adjustment and survival skills for the lobbyists who’ve relied heavily on Rolodexes that are suddenly obsolete. The current political climate at the same time appears to be more ripe than ever for lobby members with tea party friends and conservative credentials that they are hoping to parlay into business profits as long as the winds are blowing their way. Lobbyists with partisan Republican backgrounds like Wayne Hamilton, Jordan Berry and Stephen Koebele will be in position to try to step up their games with the shift to the right that the Legislature and leadership has taken. The Senate in particular could be a gold mine with Patrick in the dais and the largest tea party delegation ever in the Capitol’s east wing. Koebele has been a personal Patrick friend who’s been on board the bandwagon from the start. Hamilton is a former Texas GOP executive director who’d been an advisor to Perry in an ill-fated White House bid three years ago when he served as the point person on religious rallies and organizational support. Hamilton went on to become Abbott’s campaign manager - and that experience has landed him in a very small group of political consultants who are ranked on the hired guns list for the first time like Blakemore and veteran GOP strategist Ted Delisi. The most imposing potential obstacles that lobbyists who’ve been in the middle of internal party warfare could encounter are ill feelings and grudges that some legislators and leaders may still harbor after being the target of attacks that their candidate clients initiated in primary battles. You can ask Republicans like State Senator Joan Huffman and new Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton about that.

While close ties to politicians who are at the top of their game like Patrick and Abbott could be a cure-all for bad blood and lingering wounds, connections alone won’t be a ticket for long-term success in a business that’s destined to be more intensely competitive here this year than it’s been in recent memory. The lobbyists who hope to still be standing when the curtain goes down on the 2015 session or sessions better be bringing their A-games to a workplace where the evolution of the hired gun lobbyist with multiple clients began more than 30 years ago in a trend that has transformed a midlife specialty career into a full-fledged industry. The number of registered lobbyists here was up by more than 2 percent at the end of December compared to the same point in time before the last regular session kicked off in 2013 - and the total will likely grow exponentially after rookies who are still setting up shops or meeting the partners at boutique firms where they’d be cutting their teeth start adding their names to the rolls at the Texas Ethics Commission.
On top of the challenge that a rapidly swelling competitor pool will pose for the youngsters who are still very green and the grizzled veterans alike, the job of lobbying at the Texas Capitol in 2015 will be complicated substantially more by inherent uncertainty at a place where the dynamics will be changing in a potentially dramatic and direct correlation to the political composition of the Legislature and the leadership. The state House that’s always been the more raucous and unpredictable of the two chambers will be about the only part of the building that offers anything remotely close to stability as far as the ways of doing things are done this time around. While the state’s first new governor in the past 14 years seems poised for a first term that doesn’t feature the wild gyrations and fluctuations that marked the record-shattering tenure of predecessor Rick Perry, Abbott doesn’t appear to be the kind of leader who’ll depend as much on the lobby as typical politicians do or be as susceptible to its persuasive powers. The Senate - on the other hand - will be the real wild card in an east wing that features the relatively conservative freshman class that’s currently composed in any state, an unrivaled lack of overall experience in key leadership stations and a presiding officer who’s the first tea party icon to ever occupy a statewide office that high on the pecking order here.

That’s one of the main reasons why Blakenmore has a golden opportunity to cash in on the spoils of the victory that Patrick may have found difficult if not impossible to obtain without his advice and strategy expertise in a field that included two down-ballot statewide officials, a wealthy incumbent who he unseated in a primary runoff and a Democratic colleague in the fall. Blakenmore already represented a number of House and Senate Republicans - and a victory for client Ryan Sitton in an open Texas Railroad Commission contest was definitely gravy. But Blakenmore will have direct access to the throne east of the rotunda - and there’s speculation in some of the lobby’s highest circles that he’s lining up clients quickly as the word spreads about the headline entry on his Rolodex.

But Blakenmore won’t be the only registered lobbyist who could be in line for a banner year as a direct result of tea party tide that swept through the GOP primary and crushed every Democrat that got in its way in statewide races that Republicans swept in 2014 just like they had in every election here in the past 18 years. Others who’ve labored in the lobby trenches as a full-time profession while Blakenmore designed campaign game plans will be hoping to capitalize on a decidedly more competitive Legislature in 2015.

Koebele is a prime case in point as a lobbyist lawyer who’s gilded his trade under the radar for the most part since making his exit from the public arena where he’d been somewhat of a lightning rod. Koebele, who been a top legal advisor to George W. Bush’s gubernatorial campaign and Carole Keeton Strayhorn in the comptroller’s office when he launched a belated bid for lieutenant governor almost two years ago in the face of low odds in a field with more accomplished candidates on paper. Koebele came to Patrick’s defense as a personal friend and political backer when he heated the campaign during the campaign had reached boiling points. While the big special-interests who’d supported Republican David Dewhurst had packed the state’s last train long before Patrick beat Democrat Leticia Van de Putte in November, Koebele had never wavered with a show of support and loyalty that already appears to be paying major dividends for a lobbyist who’s labored in relative obscurity compared to bigger lobbyist names since he left public service in the midst of a furor that he’d created.

Strayhorn had given Koebele the boot from his job as the comptroller’s general counsel in 1999 after the Texas Democratic Party discovered that he’d been secretly taping telephone conversations at work. Koebele resurfaced on the lobby registration rolls in 2003 after the GOP had seized a Texas House majority that had been the final piece to a state government monopoly - and he’s off to an auspicious start in 2015 with almost dozen clients including the Midland oil company that’s run by conservative activist donor Tim Dunn. While Koebele second most potentially valuable lobby contract this year is the one he has with Dunn’s CrownQuest Operating, the association with the West Texas could make lobbyist radioactive as far as House leaders are concerned. Dunn after all has been bankingroll a revolt against House Speaker Joe Straus by tea party conservatives. But Koebele’s connections across the rotunda have secured him a spot for the first time on the list of hired guns in the biennial assessment of lobby clout at the Capitol.

The power rankings include groups that are gauged separately as lobby teams, law firm lobby practices and organizations that represent private professionals, public employees and officials and non-profit employers and their subsidiaries as well. The individuals and state agency leaders who are full-time lobbyists now along with corporate executives who represent full-time employers exclusively and political consultants who tend to concentrate more time on campaigns than working the halls of the statehouse.

Some names - like Blakenmore and Hamilton - appear on multiple lists. But Blakenmore wouldn’t be on the list this year at all if a flurry of post-election rumors about his professional options had been on the mark. One of the hottest lines of speculation on the Capitol grapevine after the general election had been that Blakenmore might be joining Patrick’s team in the lieutenant governor’s as a high-ranking official like chief of staff or communications director. We never bought into that particular piece of conjecture, however, based on the field of relatively unknown that Blakenmore seemed far more likely to pursue as a political pro who’s done quite well for himself as an independent entrepreneur. Blakenmore is a political consultant and lobbyist second for the time being anyway - even though it’s possible that could change if he does as well in Austin during the next few months in his part-time job as he appears to have an opportunity to do.

Skaters Reverse - Lobby Revolving Door Spins Counter-Clockwise for Select Few

When the Austin brother duo Gordon Johnson and Robert Johnson received the green light to beef up the Texas Capitol lobby team they were leading for the city of Houston in 2005, they recruited a high-powered cadre of professional peers that featured Walter Fisher and Randy Erben at the top of the list.

No one at the time could have imagined that Erben, Fisher and one of the Johnsons would have been willing to put thriving lobby practices on hold in exchange for roles they now have as chief advisors to the state’s newly-designed Republican leadership triad as the regular session gets off the ground in 2015. While Gordon Johnson is still a member of the private sector as the political director for Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, Fisher Joe Straus the past three years as Speaker Joe Straus are the most recent examples of lobbyists who’ve re-entered the revolving door in reverse as the legislative director and senior advisor to Governor Greg Abbott and Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick respectively. The state’s first new governor in the past 14 years also turned to the Texas Capitol City’s version of K Street when he hired Luis Saenz to be his appointments director.

The lobbyists who Abbott and Patrick have enlisted for high-ranking roles on their new Capitol staffs
are especially valuable as a result of the multi-dimensional perspective they bring as political professionals who had critical experience in state government before they crossed the line into the private sector. But they're going clearly against the grain by taking the call of public service at a time when a record number of potential future competitors are heading in the opposite direction with visions of becoming as successful in their careers as private practitioners as Fisher, Erben and Saenz had been at theirs and probably will be again at some point.

The Austin lobby headhunter excursion that Abbott and Patrick undertook has shaped up to be a win-win situation nonetheless within a profession where the competition will be more intense than ever this year in the wake of the biggest turnover in statewide executive offices in Texas in two dozen years.

The exodus of the trio who are now working for the state's two top new leaders - for starters - has freed up several spots in the highest echelons of the hired gun list on the Capitol Inside Texas Lobby Power Rankings published in 2015. It also means that there ostensibly will be more money to be made by the veteran and up-and-coming lobbyists whose ranks are being flooded with an infusion of new talent that's hungry and armed with major leadership connections. While the lobbyists who've taken sabatical jobs with Abbott and Patrick will be losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in income for the time being as state employees, they can expect their stock to be off-the-charts when they return to the industry eventually.

Based on a cumulative review of lobby records at the Texas Ethics Commission, the number of registered lobbyists in Austin could be slightly if not significantly higher in 2015 than it's been in the current century here if not ever. The TEC had a grand total of 1,606 individuals on the official lobby rolls by the end of last year compared to 1,570 when the curtain fell on 2012 a few weeks before the last regular legislative session here got under way. The registered lobby count at the state ethics agency has typically gone up by about 300 in odd-numbered years when regular legislative sessions were held here.

But the TEC totals include a countless number of lawyers and other professionals who register to lobby even though they will be doing so on a limited basis if and when clients have business that require trips to the Capitol for meetings with legislators or telephone conversations with them on occasion.

The state agency doesn't break out the number of lobbyists who are professional public advocates on a full-time basis regardless of whether the Legislature is open for business or taking the off campaign. That's one of the few cases outside the House and Senate chambers between January and May and quite possibly during part or all of the summer are the ones who qualify for consideration for the biennial ratings that we present to you proudly in a day in a wide-range of categories that reflect the systematic evolution of an Austin lobby that's become increasingly less layered in the past several decades.

In terms of head counts, Texas had almost twice as many registered lobbyists than California up until the Golden State expanded reporting requirements four years ago in a move that inflated its lobby totals dramatically. Names and numbers alone, however, can't measure the enormous amount of influence that the Texas lobbyists who ply their trade here 12 months a year can expect to wield over the course of the next five months at the mammoth pink granite building that crowns a hill near the north end of Congress Avenue in the nation's 11th largest city.

There will be more full-time lobbyists working the halls of the statehouse here this year as a consequence of shakeups high on the organizational charts at every state agency that's headed by an elected statewide official here. Every single statewide office in Texas has a new boss in the wake of the first complete and total turnover at that level at the ballot box here since 1991 when Democrats Ann Richards and Bob Bullock took over in the jobs that Abbott and Patrick have now. But even though public service has proven to be an ideal and common training ground for an ever-increasing number of lobbyists who've been elected officials in Texas or worked for them, the number who've made the transition back to the government payroll after working on both sides of the line like the high-level advisors that the state's top two new leaders brought into their Capitol shops is a drop in the bucket comparatively.

The relatively positive reception that Abbott and Patrick received with the lobby hires seems to be a sign that perceptions about the associations between lobbyists and political leaders have changed in the past couple of decades. Republican George W. Bush gave his critics an opportunity to howl when he hired at least two prominent lobbyists who'd bounced between the public and private sectors before he ousted Richards in the battle for governor here in 1994. Bush, who'd never served in an elected office until that time, apparently felt that the vast pool of institutional knowledge and experience in the trenches that Reggie Bushar and Cliff Johnson would bring to his administration in the early stages was worth more than what their financial entourage might bring. Bushard had been the press secretary for Bill Clements during a second term in the late 1980s as the state's first Republican governor since Reconstruction. Johnson had served in the Texas House as a conservative Democrat during that time and ended up eventually to return to the lobby as planned, they continued to advise some of the state's top leaders after parting ways with the Bush administration.

Perry piqued the suspicions of his detractors as well when he named Johnson and several other influential lobbyists to major positions in his first few year as Bush's successor. While Johnson was a likeable figure who'd served in the House with the state's third GOP governor in more than a century when both were rural Democrats, Perry found his hiring of a former Republican House colleague who'd become a successful lobbyist to be a far more controversial choice. Mike Toomey arrived on the scene with a disarming persona and a short legal career behind him.

In a business where lobbyists are often viewed in an unflattering light like lawyers, journalists and politicians themselves, Abbott couldn't be certain what the public reaction might be to the decision that he'd hand-picked on the advice of his chief of staff to bring Erben and Saenz on board in the infant stages of a gannettorial stint that began about two weeks ago. The Abbott lobby hires had the potential to draw the ire of Democrats based on similar political backgrounds as former assistant secretaries of state under separate Republican governors. That wouldn't bode well for an incoming GOP governor who started his new job with the reputation to be a bipartisan leader. But Patrick, played his hand first when he announced the hiring of Fisher in a move that business establishment Republicans and Democrats had to find refreshing for a new lieutenant governor who'd run farther to the right than anyone who'd held the job before him. Fisher alternated between the public and private sectors over the course of a long career that included stints as the Texas Municipal League's chief lobbyist before serving as the state  

Reverse Revolving Door
Top Aides to Major State Officials Who Had Been in Public Service Before Lobby Seats Listed in Alphabetical Order

Reggie Bushar
Governor George W. Bush & Bill Clements Advisor

Randy Erben
Governor Greg Abbott Legislative Director

Nancy Fisher
Texas House Speaker Tom Craddick Chief of Staff

Walter Fisher
Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick Senior Advisor

Cliff Johnson
Governors Rick Perry & George W. Bush Advisor

Robert Howden
Governor Rick Perry Advisor

Luis Saenz
Governor Greg Abbott Appointments Director

Dan Shelley
Governor Rick Perry Legislative Director

Patricia Shipton
Governor Rick Perry Legislative Director

Mike Toomey
Governors Rick Perry & Bill Clements Chief of Staff
Robert Duncan, Ex-Texas
Civil Justice League
Official

Mark Borskey
Ex-Deputy Legislative
Director for Gov. Rick
Perry, Ex-Texas House
Aide

Nora Del Bosque
Ex-State House Aide and
Appropriations Committee
Clerk

Bill Pellow
Bill Pellow & Associates,
Texas Computer Industry
Council Founder

Eric Wright
Congress Avenue
Partners, Ex-Chief of Staff
to Lt. Gov. Bill Ratliff

Gilbert Turrieta
TMA Official and LBB
Examiner

Wayne Hamilton
San Jacinto Public Affairs,
Ex-Advisor to Gov. Rick
Perry, Ex-Texas
Republican Party
Executive Director

Michael Grimes
Imperium Public Affairs,
Ex-Chief of Staff to State
Senator Chris Harris, Ex-
Gov. George W. Bush Aide

Trent Townsend
Imperium Public Affairs,
Ex-Chief of Staff to State
Senator Kirk Watson, Ex-
Legislative Director for
State Senator Kim Brimer

Jim Dow
Cross Oak Group, Ex-
Texas 20/20 PAC Director,
Ex-Texas House Aide, Ex-
Obama White House
Office of Public
Engagement

Shayne Woodard
Ex-Chief of Staff to
Railroad Commissioner

Barry Williamson, Ex-Aide
to State Senator Bill Sims and Rep.
David Counts

Frank Santos
Santos Alliances, Ex-
National Hispanic Caucus
of State Legislators
Consultant, Ex-House Aide

Jody Richardson
Allen Boone Humphries
Robinson, Ex-TV Reporter

Snapper Carr
Focused Advocacy

General Counsel, Ex-
Texas Municipal League
Counsel

Deborah Ingersoll
Legislative Solutions, Key
Fundraiser

Joe Garcia
Texas Capitol Group, Ex-
Chief of Staff to State
Senator Eddie Lucio

Chris Hosek
Texas Star Alliance, Ex-
Chief of Staff to Elizabeth

Ames Jones at the Texas Railroad Commission and
parliamentarian under Bullock the Democrat and the three Republicans who followed him in the
lieutenant governor's office. Fisher - an affable personality with an encyclopedic understanding of
legislative procedure - was widely viewed as a sign that Patrick wanted to keep his administration
from going too far off the tracks after unpreempted conservative posturing as a candidate and
during his first two weeks on the new job.

As far as the hundreds of other public advocates who are full-time lobbyists at the Capitol go, their
average individual worth and combined value should be higher than ever as the 2015 regular session
progresses in large part as a result of the uncertainty that the leadership changes have created. The
Legislature as a whole and the Senate in particular are substantially more conservative on paper
than they've been at any point in the GOP era here. All of the true Senate freshmen and quite a few
first-term House Republicans won tickets to Austin on the strength of the support they'd secured from
tea party conservatives who've made big special interests a popular target for criticism. Business
forces will be keeping their fingers crossed on Patrick as a new leader who they are regarding as
unpredictable at best in the early going. That in turn will make the job more challenging for lobbyists
who'd become accustomed to relatively moderate rule at the Capitol under both of the political parties
that have controlled the place. But the added competition could make the lobby profession here more
complicated as well as young cowboys battle old lions for a piece of a pie that's always limited no
matter how big it becomes.

🌟Hired Guns

The lobby is one of the most difficult professions to enter with any realistic hopes of success - and the
political professionals who are able to actually make real livings as lobbyists are often former
lawmakers and other elected officials who've been trained for the job as the targets of lobbying. Most
of the lobbyists who've never held elected office have usually worked in high-level capacities for
bosses who have. Government experience is an absolute prerequisite - and connections that are
acquired from it are necessary tools of the trade for those who hope to survive.

Breaking into the business in the Texas Capitol City is complicated all the more by the fact that the
turnover is so high at best - and that helps explain why the lion's share of names on the Capitol
Inside hired guns contract lobbyist list might seem mighty familiar, to the specialized audience that's
reading this.

The lobby quartet that crowns the hired gun list - Neal T. "Buddy" Jones, Mike Toomey, Rusty Kelley
and Bill Messer - have all been ranked among the top four for an entire decade. The only thing that's
changed on the top rungs of the ladder is the order in which those four have been listed in the
biennial rankings that had been published on an annual basis in the early stages.

Jones - an attorney who served in the Texas House in the early 1980s as a conservative Democrat
from Hillsboro - is ranked first this time around just ahead of Bill Messer, who is rated second for two years ago for a couple of very
simple reasons. A former Baylor University board of regents chairman, Jones is the captain of the
number one lobby team at the statehouse in terms of cumulative talent, client lists and the
cooperation of individuals and skills and expertise in a group with a core base that's remained
intact essentially longer than almost if not all of the competitor firms have been in business. The folks who hire Jones like Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and H.E.B. boss Charles Butt get HillCo Partners as part of the package.

Toomey and Messer, who both happen to be former state representatives with law degrees as well,
have been working in tandem and separately for most of the past decade as the biggest names in a
private club of political professionals that's more loosely conected than the competition at HillCo.
The Texas Lobby Group that they conceived a dozen years ago has been the unofficial centerpiece
for the Texas Capitol Group that includes several more lobbyists and communications experts who
aren't registered to lobby. Toomey and Messer have both been ranked first on the hired guns list at times,
but the difference in their score is due in large part to the close relationships they had with Rick Perry and Tom
Crandall respectively when they were serving as the governor and Texas House speaker.

While the curtain dropped last month on Perry's historic stint as the longest-serving governor in Texas
history, Toomey hasn't appeared to lose any of the competitive edge or clout that he wields as a
lobbyist thanks to a significant degree to his longtime association with the Texans for Lawsuit Reform.
But the closest thing that Toomey has had to a liability in the lobby has been an image as a partisan
Republican who had a major role in the overthrow of Democrats in power in the Texas House
where he'd served as a member of the minority part in the late 1980s. And there are times when
that's probably proven to be more of an asset than an obstacle based on the success he's enjoyed as
a public affairs advocate and on for the past 20 years or more. Jones - on the other hand - has
been the ultimate bipartisan lobbyist extraordinary at a Capitol where he's had the same high level of
sway regardless of the party in power. The HillCo boss has a slight edge over Toomey as a result in
the competition for the pinnacle spot on the hired guns chart.

Blakemore, the Dan Patrick campaign advisor, is the only newcomer among the top 10-ranked
hired guns list - but the verdict is still out on whether he will be able to stay there until after the
current lieutenant governor has moved on. Almost all of the other contract lobbyists who are ranked
in the top 25 have been there before - and that's a testament to how difficult it is to achieve a
rating that high in the first place.

Some of the most notable A-list additions are people who graduated from the rising stars list in 2013
to relatively lofty hired gun status this time around. That group includes Mark Miner and David White
- pair of Republican operatives who'd had major roles at the Capitol and on the campaign trail for some
of the state's highest-ranking current and former statewide officials. White - a top advisor to Susan
Combs in her roles as the state comptroller and as candidate for the post - served as Republican
Glenn Hegar's campaign manager during his successful bid for the job in 2014.

Miner was in the news on a regular basis for several years as Perry's press secretary at times and
campaign spokesperson in races for governor and president. Miner's stock as a lobbyist had been on
the upswing before it received an additional bump when Abbott hired his main lobby partner, Luis
Saenz, to be his first appointments director in the governor's office.

The hired gun list for the first time features a couple of other former Perry advisors - Ted Delisi and
Deirdre Delisi - who are listed together in a high spot on the list as a result of the common bonds they
share as a husband and wife who are lobby partners as well. The female half of the Delisi duo had
served as a chief of state for Perry before he appointed her to the Texas Transportation Commission
that she ended up chairing throughout her tenure on it.
Texas Lobby Power Rankings 2015

Austin attorney Gardner Pate - a member of the lobby team at the Locke Lord law firm - has made the leap from a rising star to a hired gun whose value has soared as well in light of his role as a director and chief legal advisor for Abbott's winning gubernatorial campaign in 2014. The list of hired gun lobbyists who've vaulted the highest from their positions on the chart two years ago includes Mindy Ellmer, a veteran statehouse professional who's had a close personal relationship for years with the powerful chairman of the Texas House Administration Committee. The committee boss in question is State Rep. Charlie Geren of Fort Worth - has been one of Speaker Joe Straus' top lieutenants since he and several other GOP colleagues put him in position to win the leadership post eight years ago.

Some of the other hired guns whose value also has jumped considerably in the new rankings installment include the Gardere law firm duo of Mark Vane and Royce Poinsett, Graydon Group members Jay Propes and Jay Brown and other contract lobbyists like Trey Blocker, Keith Strama, Kathy Grant, Mario Martinez, Michael Grimes and Trent Townsend.

🌟Rising Stars

The list of lobby rookies with star potential may be more loaded with talent and relevant experience in 2015 than it's been in the past. But the unprecedented diversity that the rising stars chart features this time around is arguably its most intriguing and significant aspect in terms of a potential barometer for the future of the lobby here.

An unprecedented turnover in statewide and legislative offices combined has all but guaranteed that the competition will be at a record level in terms of both quality and quantity. But the rising stars list in 2015 better reflects the state's overall population than the lobby here has in years past as an industry that's been dominated by white males. Nine of the 10 highest-ranked lobby newcomers on the rising stars list are either women or Hispanic or members of ethnic minorities or both. The list's composition mirrors the state's overall for the most part with three Hispanics and one African-American ranked in the top 10. Eleven of the 20 rising stars this year are females.

The rising stars list begins with Carrie Simmons and Amy Maxwell - a pair of former Capitol aides who have embarked in budding lobbying careers on different paths. Simmons has been deeply involved in statehouse political warring as recent former executive director of the Texas House Republican Caucus and a charter officer for the pro-GOP group that sprouted up last year under the banner of Red State Women. A former aide to State Senator Larry Taylor, a Friendswood Republican who's chairing the Senate Education Committee this year for the first time, Simmons will have a hall-of-fame level lobbyist as a mentor in her new profession as a new member of Mike Toomey's team at the Texas Lobby Group. Simmons' affiliation with the firm that Bill Messer and Toomey co-founded also will give her a chance to learn the ropes of the trade from Lara Keel, a highly-respected lobbyist who's one of the group's charter members and doubling as the Red State Women's president as well.

Maxwell - the original chief of staff for Texas Railroad Commissioner David Porter - is operating independently as someone who plans to represent clients in the oil and gas industry as a lobbyist and lawyer as well. Maxwell picked up some valuable experience several years ago during a fairly brief stint with the former State law firm downtown shop. But she'd focussed primarily on public service as a former aide to Republicans David Dewhurst and Keaton Strahey in the lieutenant governor's office and comptroller's office respectively before helping Porter make the transition to state government as the manager of his staff at the agency that regulates the energy industry here. Maxwell decided to specialize as a lobbyist in an area that she's been around most of her life as a Kilgore native whose father, grandfather and great-grandfathers all made their livings in the East Texas Oil Field.

The up-and-comers list includes Micah Rodriguez - a former state Senate aide who'll have five-star tutelage as well as a new member of the Blackridge lobby shop that Rusty Kelley runs. Kelley has been one of the most successful lobbyists when it comes to bipartisan persuasion and long-lasting success that hasn't been affected by the Capitol conversion from Democrat to Republican. Rodriguez, a former Senate Hispanic Caucus executive director who worked for Democrats Carlos Uresti and John Whitmire in the upper chamber, appears to have what it takes to work both sides of the partisan dividing line as a lobbyist.

Colin Parish ranks high on the list of rising lobby stars as well as a former Rick Perry policy advisor in the governor's office after stints as a Texas Transportation Commission official and chief of staff to GOP State Rep. Wayne Smith. Jamie Dunesing and Amy DeWese, who worked as top aides to Dewhurst and Republican State Rep. Kenneth Sheets respectively, are rated in the top third of the lobby freshmen class as well in 2015 as representatives exclusively at the Capitol for the Texas Association of Health Plans and Atmos Energy respectively.

A.J. Bingham - who advised the Texas House State Affairs Committee before entering the lobby - is one of two African-Americans on the rising stars list this year along with Locke Lord law firm member Jeri Brooks of Houston.

🌟Former Legislators & Agency Officials

The most prominent new names on the list of ex-state lawmakers who've entered the lobby profession in recent months include former Texas Senators Ken Armbrister and Todd Staples and former lead House budget writer Jim Pitts.

Staples, who served two terms as the state agriculture commissioner after a dozen years in the Senate and House combined, signed on as the chief lobbyist for the Texas Oil & Gas Association after an unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor in 2014. Staples has taken over as the group's president when the industry has been in a state of roller-coaster fluctuations that have been driven most recently by a sharp drop in oil prices.

Pitts - the twin brother of Texas Star Alliance lobby group leader John Pitts - is teaming with former House Appropriations Committee director Amy Peterson in a public affairs firm that's just getting off the ground. The Republican who served in the House for 22 years before opting against a re-election bid in 2014, Pitts chaired the budget panel in the lower chamber during four out of the past five regular sessions. He'd been GOP Speaker Joe Straus' most powerful ally in the Capitol's west wing before the transition back to the private sector.

Armbrister - in a move that shows how small the Texas lobby world can be at times - has gone to work at John Pitts' firm at the start of a career as a lobbyist that seems long overdue considering the fact that he stepped down from the Senate the same year that Staples took over as the state farm

George W. Bush  
Susan Ross  
83  
Ex-Texas Dental Association Public Affairs Director  
James Clark  
84  
Ex-John Sharp Campaign Manager and Jim Mattox Campaign Aide  
Robert Culley  
85  
Ex-LeGalise Aide  
Shannon Phillips Mersonoy  
86  
Mercny Public Affairs, Ex-Aetna Lobbyist, Ex-Trade Association President  
Stephanie Gibson  
Texas Legislative Associates, Ex-Texas Retailers Association Vice President  
Wayne Hamilton  
San Jacinto Public Affairs, Ex-Advisor to Gov. Rick Perry, Ex-Texas Republican Party Executive Director  
Ron Hinkle  
Ex-Texas Department of Economic Development Official, Ex-Texas House Sergeant at Arms  
Chuck Rice  
Chuck Rice Group, Ex-State Senate Aide and Texas Hospital Association Official  
Jack Roberts  
Ex-Deputy Comptroller  
Scott Gilmore  
GovB2Partners, Ex-Texas House, Ex-Senate and Congress Aide and House Sergeant at Arms  
Robert Howden  
Ex-Texas Tax Reform Commission Staff Director, Ex-Communications Director for Gov. Rick Perry  
Michael Jewell  
Stratus Policy Group, Corporate Lawyer and Legislative Lobbyist  
Marshall Kenderbine  
Ex-House Appropriations Committee Analyst, Ex-Texas House Campaign Manager and Senate Aide  
Robert Peeler  
Longbow Partners, Ex-State Senate Chief of Staff and Aide to Gov. George Bush  
Brett Findley  
Longbow Partners, Ex-State Senate Chief of Staff  
Chris Heckman  
Ex-Deputy Chief of Staff to Gov. Rick Perry  
Will Yarnell  
Ex-Chief Advisor to Texas House Democrat  
Gerald Valdez  
100  
Ex-Texas Department of Economic Development Official

chief in 2007. Armbrister, who served in the Legislature two years longer than Jim Pitts, is launching a lobbying stint belatedly after taking a detour for eight years as Perry’s legislative director in the governor’s office. Very few lobbyists from Austin to Washington and every state capital in between seemed to be cut out for the job more than Armbrister in terms of personality, experience and institutional knowledge as someone who’d arguably been one of the most effective legislators here ever.

Most of the other former lawmakers on the list had a few years of experience as lobbyists under their belts by the time the 2015 regular session opened for business last month.

Two of the highest-ranking former state agency officials who lobby - Tom Suehs and Robert Scott - are members of the Texas Star Alliance firm that’s ranked among the top five lobby teams. Suehs and Scott served as the state’s health and education commissioners respectively before beginning lobby careers.

Dan Pearson - a former deputy comptroller who led the state agency that oversees environmental issues - has been a perennial figure high on the list of lobbyist who’d headed governmental agencies in Texas. Pearson is a veteran lobbyist at the number one ranked lobby team HillCo Partners.

Teams & Groups

The lobbyist teams and law firm lobby shop lists haven’t changed much at or near the top in the past few years. It’s no coincidence that the three top lobby teams - HillCo, the Texas Lobby Group (on which the Texas Capitol Group revolves) and the smaller but potent firm Blackridge - are all led by the same lobbyists who’ve ranked among the top four on the hired guns list throughout the past decade.

The top-ranked law firm lobby practice at Houston-based Locke Lord is still crowning the particular list that it’s topped for most if not all of the past 10 years. The Austin lobby team at the Gardere law firm has strengthened its hold on the second spot on this list after adding some muscle with the enlistment of Royce Poinsett. Veteran Gardere lobbyist Mark Vane and Poinsett both appear relatively high on the hired guns list as well.

The Texas Capitol team at the international law firm Greenberg Traurig ranks a very close third after adding Houston lawyer Jim Grace to its ranks in the past year. Grace and Poinsett had both worked as lobbyists for the Baker Botts firm before it decided to get out of the lobbying business at the state level in Texas.

Robert Miller, who leads the Locke Lord lobby group at the Capitol here, is the highest ranked hired gun lobbyist who’s a member of a law firm with a team that maintains a high presence at the statehouse in Austin. Miller has stressed the teamwork approach more than other leaders of law firm lobby groups whose members tend to work more independently and autonomously even though they have the same employer and share office space.

The Locke Lord team can expect to flex more muscle than ever this year in light of a key role that Miller played in new Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick’s fundraising efforts and lobby colleague Gardner Pate’s recent experience as the chief outside legal advisor for Governor Greg Abbott’s campaign in 2014.

The McGuire Woods team in Austin remains high on the law firm lobby shop list despite the House Chief of Staff position that replaced the temporary exit that Luis Saenz has made with a decision to sign as Abbott’s first appointments director in the governor’s office. But Mark Miner will be moving into the lead role at McGuire Woods, which lost a key leader but gained an extremely valuable connection with Saenz’s shift to the public sector in a move that will make the firm’s group even stronger if and when he returns eventually as expected.

Private Sector Professionals

Two of the most notable revisions on the list of lobbyists who are full-time corporate employees are the elevations of Kellie Duhr and Dya Campos into high spots on the chart as in-house representatives here for Walmart and the San Antonio-based H.E.B. grocery chain respectively.

But while the Austin-based lobbyists for AT&T and CenterPoint Energy remain in their familiar spots as the two highest-ranked corporate in-house advocates, Karen Steakley is making a whopping debut on this particular list in the number three slot as the point person here for the maverick car maker Tesla.

With Tesla launching a full-court press to change Texas law that it sees as an obstacle here, the company that’s making vehicles that run on electricity or battery power has assembled a high-powered team of Austin lobbyists as formidable reinforcements for Steakley.

As a result of the battle that’s shaping up over the Tesla offensive and separate fights that erupted two years ago between car manufacturers and the businesses that sell the finished goods, the Texas Automobile Dealers Association has moved up into the higher realms of the list of professional organizations that lobby at the statehouse here.

With the energy industry expected to seek legislative help amid a downturn brought on by the oil price decline, the Texas Oil & Gas Association that’s commonly referred to as TXOGA and the Texas Independent Producers & Royalty Owners group that’s called TIPRO for short have jumped to higher spots on the professional association rankings for 2015. TXOGA’s hiring of former Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples as its new president should be a momentum-booster for the group at a critical time for the industry.

The Best of the Rest That We Missed

As a project that was published initially on the same day in early 2003 that Capitol Inside made its debut on the Internet, the lobby rankings has mushroomed into a monstrous undertaking during the past 12 years. Accidental omissions are inevitable - as a consequence - and we apologize in advance for failing to include everyone who’s worthy of mention here. That would be less likely to occur, however, if we’d known about the individuals and groups who deserved to be ranked but haven’t been. So this is a two-way street - and please feel free to call it to our attention if you think you’ve been unjustly left out.
