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New Jersey lobbyists get NJ pensions, too -- and even lifetime health benefits

[northjersey.com](#) ^ | April 25, 2010 | Elsie YoungPosted on **Sunday, April 25, 2010 3:15:37 PM** by [Coleus](#)

Some of New Jersey's most influential lobbyists — including a onetime Democratic operative now making more than \$500,000 a year — are set to collect public pensions, their reward as political appointees to part-time government commissions. Several get an even sweeter deal: lifetime enrollment in the state's health care plans, leaving taxpayers on the hook for yearly premiums that average \$5,200 for individuals and \$13,000 for families. Among them is Jamie Fox, a former transportation commissioner and chief of staff for Gov. James E. McGreevey, whose \$11,954-a-year appointment to the Local Finance Board enabled him to remain in the pension and health systems after McGreevey resigned, leaving Fox without a Cabinet-level job. Last year, he was paid \$513,000 as a lobbyist.

Governor Christie last month signed legislation to give pensions only to full-time state and local employees, but the legislation grandfathered those already eligible for benefits. To be eligible for benefits, a person must have 10 years of service with the state. Christie said he ultimately wants to remove part-time appointees from the retirement and health systems, saying their board memberships were "pension plays" and "gifts."

"It's one thing to pay someone a stipend of maybe \$5,000 or \$10,000 to do the work," said Assembly Republican Budget Officer Joseph Malone, R-Burlington. "But for us to pay them exorbitant benefits is a problem because those systems are in desperate, desperate shape." Democratic legislative leaders did not return calls for comment. Part-timers paid as little as \$1,500 a year were eligible for benefits until 2008, when Gov. Jon Corzine raised the minimum to \$7,500. Critics say that's still far too generous, as New Jersey confronts a \$46 billion pension-fund shortfall, public-employee layoffs, the country's highest property taxes and the historic defeat last week of more than half the state's school budgets.

In 2000, there were 69 registered lobbyists serving on various state boards and commissions whose tasks are as varied as reviewing tax bills, advising on cultural and arts spending, shaping policy on services for people with disabilities and regulating professional trades. By last year, the number of lobbyists had more than doubled to 168. Some lobbyists say they shouldn't be excluded from public service — and its generous benefits — merely because they have well-paying, full-time jobs in the private sector. Ultimately, they say, New Jersey benefits from their political experience, gained while working on successful campaigns, and often from jobs in Democratic or Republican administrations.

"Some people may consider me a political hack. I'm not," said Al Komjathy, who last year was paid \$220,000 by his lobbying firm, and who collected \$18,000 as an appointee to the Hunterdon County Tax Board, records show. "To get to where I have, I've had to have senatorial sign-offs and stuff like that. So, obviously, people have some respect for some of the things I've done all my life." Board nominees are submitted by the Governor's Office and are confirmed by legislative vote.

Targeted by Christie

New Jersey has hundreds of boards, commissions and authorities, which collectively award billions of dollars in contracts and bonds. Each is under review by Christie, who has promised to eliminate many and reduce others' spending to rein in what he has called a "shadow budget." Some lobbyists have derived big rewards from their part-time work. The Record, in a review of public documents, found:

* **Jamie Fox, whose lobbying firm, Fox & Shuffler, paid him \$513,000 last year. A onetime chief of staff to McGreevey, Fox would have been cut from the state's benefits when McGreevey resigned in November 2004. Instead, McGreevey made him a member of the Local Finance Board — allowing Fox to continue his health, prescription and dental coverage, and to collect a pension based on his top salary of \$141,000. Fox did not respond to a request for comment.**

* Idida Rodriguez of Paterson, who worked for 1868 Public Affairs and her own firm, Irodz Associates, in 2009, earning \$84,288. She also has two part-time public jobs, paying \$8,500 from the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners and \$12,000 from the Local Finance Board, and she has medical, prescription and dental coverage through the state. Rodriguez — who during the McGreevey administration was part of a team awarded a \$1.5 million public-relations contract for the multimillion-dollar-losing Schools Construction Corp. — is a longtime Democrat who worked on Senate and gubernatorial campaigns for Corzine, who appointed her to the public jobs. Rodriguez did not return phone calls for comment.

* State AFL-CIO President Charles Wowkanech, a registered lobbyist who was paid \$154,736 by the union, plus \$40,252 in "other compensation," according to 2008 IRS filings, the most recent available. Last year, he was paid \$27,984 as an appointee to the Maritime Pilot and Docking Pilot Commission — a seat he was given despite a legal opinion from the Office of Legislative Services, which argued that Wowkanech lacked the experience required. Wowkanech — whose wife made \$16,934 last year as an appointee to the Cape May County Board of Taxation — was enrolled in the state health benefits system until December. Another AFL-CIO employee, lobbyist Eric E. Richard, was paid \$16,312 as a member of the Hunterdon County Board of Taxation and also received \$4,664 for a part-time position at Rutgers University. Wowkanech did not respond to requests for comment.

* Richard Ambrosino, a managing partner of 1868 Public Affairs and former aide to Gov. Christie Whitman. An appointee to the Camden County Board of Elections, Ambrosino made \$16,386 last year and also had his family enrolled in the county-sponsored health plan. Privately, his employer's clients include the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners, which Christie has said spends excessively on professional contracts, particularly for lobbying.

Ambrosino said that he and another Republican, plus two Democrats, meet once a month and oversee every election, training board workers, certifying polling places, verifying signatures and tabulating ballots. For the most recent gubernatorial election, he said, he worked nearly 24 hours.

"For next year, we're working on redistricting," he said. Varied credentials

Privately, Komjathy, the Hunterdon Tax Board member, represents such clients as Comcast, Anheuser-Busch, Sprint Nextel and Waste Management. He ranks among the state's top 20 lobbyists in terms of billing, with nearly \$900,000 in receipts last year, according to state Election Law Enforcement

Commission records. Komjathy said his part-time state job required four semesters of course work plus an exam at Rutgers, and some days the Tax Board hears 70 appeals cases. He said he had no qualms about getting insurance for himself and this wife through the state. "I didn't create the rules. I just happen to be a beneficiary of them," he said. "You have to attract people to these positions. Sometimes you have to compensate them."

Some lobbyists, such as MBI GluckShaw executive Paul N. Bontempo, say they get little from their government gigs other than the satisfaction of public service. Last year, MBI GluckShaw had \$3.7 million in receipts, making it New Jersey's third-largest lobbyist in terms of billing. Bontempo's pay was \$175,000. He also made \$1,600 attending meetings of the Board of Master Plumber Examiners, to which he was appointed as a public member — someone not involved in the profession — by then-acting Gov. Richard J. Codey. Bontempo does not have state-sponsored insurance. "I bring a perspective not only as a consumer who has to call a plumber. I bring a perspective of having been a private businessman most of my life," Bontempo said. "I get a printout from the pension system. My pension's going to be \$42 a month. This is hardly a pension padder. Honestly, quite frankly, I just want to be involved in something."

Passaic County post

One lobbyist, Bill Maer, was paid \$185,000 last year by Public Strategies Impact, his full-time employer, according to state Election Law Enforcement Commission disclosure reports. He also is a spokesman for Passaic County Sheriff Jerry Speziale, for which his 2009 pensionable income for part-time work was \$51,776. The position comes with health insurance for Maer and his family. "It's not a full-time job, but I'm on call 24/7," said Maer, a former chief of staff to Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., Democratic legislative aide and Corzine campaign worker. Maer — who also has an uncompensated appointment to the State Building Authority — said his Sheriff's Department position saves the department money, because otherwise staff would be paid overtime to handle media calls, process public-records requests, write press releases and coordinate news conferences. "This is not some pension-padding job," Maer said. "I do it because they trust me. It's not just to answer some call once every three weeks. I'm in the guts of this agency."

New Jersey commissions, boards and authorities counted 69 lobbyists among their members in 2000. Last year, the number of lobbyists on New Jersey commissions grew to 168.

Lobbyists in New Jersey pension system

Richard Ambrosino

- 2009 earnings as managing partner of 1868 Public Affairs: \$6,220 (total compensation unavailable)
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Camden County Board of Elections: \$16,386
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 3 years

Paul N. Bontempo

- 2009 earnings as director of MBI GluckShaw: \$175,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Board of Master Plumbers: \$1,600
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 5 years, 11 months

Peter Cammarano

- 2009 earnings as partner in Cammarano & Hagan: \$395,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Casino Reinvestment Development Authority: \$18,000
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 16 years

Paul T. Fader

- 2009 earnings as partner in Florio, Perrucci, Steinhardt & Fader: \$76,245
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Bergen County Board of Taxation: \$20,497
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 12 years, 2 months

James "Jamie" Fox

- 2009 earnings as partner in Fox & Shuffler: \$513,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Local Finance Board: \$11,954
- Enrolled as single adult in New Jersey-sponsored health, prescription and dental insurance plans
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 7 years

Karen J. Kominsky

- 2009 earnings as president of ADV Group: \$150,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to New Jersey Real Estate Commission: \$10,460
- Enrolled with family coverage in New Jersey-sponsored health and prescription insurance plans
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 7 years

Aladar "Al" G. Komjathy

- 2009 earnings as partner in Komjathy & Stewart: \$220,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Hunterdon County Board of Taxation: \$18,304
- Enrolled with spousal coverage in New Jersey-sponsored health, prescription and dental insurance plans
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 25 years, 8 months

Curtis S. Macysyn

- 2009 earnings as vice president of Community Associations Institute: \$24,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Board of Mortuary: \$1,300

- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 1 year

William J. Maer

- 2009 earnings as partner in Public Strategies Impact: \$185,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as spokesman for Passaic County Sheriff's Department: \$51,776
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 18 years

Eric E. Richard

- 2009 earnings as AFL-CIO legislative affairs director: \$91,964, plus \$27,071 in "other compensation"
- 2009 earnings as appointee to Hunterdon County Board of Taxation: \$16,312
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 8 years, 2 months

Idida Rodriguez

- 2009 earnings as partner in 1868 Public Affairs: \$84,288
- 2009 earnings as appointee to Local Finance Board: \$12,000
- 2009 earnings as appointee to Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners: \$8,500
- Enrolled with single adult coverage in New Jersey health, prescription and dental insurance plans
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 12 years, 5 months

Jeffrey Warsh

- 2009 earnings as partner in MBI GluckShaw: \$90,000
- 2009 pensionable earnings as appointee to Veterinary Medical Examiners Board: \$1,200
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 10 years, 1 month

Charles Wowkanech

- 2009 earnings as president of AFL-CIO: \$154,736, plus \$40,252 in "other compensation"
- 2009 earnings as appointee to Maritime Pilot and Docking Pilot Commission: \$27,984
- Ended enrollment in New Jersey health insurance plans in December 2009
- Service credit in New Jersey pension system: 6 years, 8 months

Sources: *New Jersey Election and Law Enforcement Commission*; *New Jersey Division of Pensions and Benefits*

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1 posted on **Sunday, April 25, 2010 3:15:37 PM** by **Coleus**

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To: **Coleus**

You read stuff like this and you wonder how on earth it can possibly be fixed.

And people think welfare queens are such a drag on the economy? NJ citizens are LOSING THEIR HOMES because they can't keep up with the exorbitant taxes they have to pay, while these soulless thieving bastards laugh their asses off and rack up hundreds of thousands of dollars EACH every year for a LIFETIME thanks to phony appointments.

The saddest thing of all is that so many of us have been brainwashed into thinking MORE taxes are the only answer to a deficit created by cronyism and corruption.

2 posted on **Sunday, April 25, 2010 3:33:33 PM** by **dbwz** (DISSENT IS PATRIOTIC)

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To: **dbwz**

"And people think welfare queens are such a drag on the economy?"

EXACTLY!

I don't mean to endorse welfare fraud, but for years now I've been aware of many "upstanding" people who rob the public blind (legally or illegally) and who don't even realize or care that they are basically the same as the welfare queens.

And New Jersey is a hotbed of this type of behaviour.

It has got to change. At least Christie is in there calling a spade a spade and REVEALING this stuff.

Even if he fails at least this nonsense will be on the record.