

The Salt Lake Tribune

Tribune Editorial: From the horse's mouth: Money buys influence in the Legislature



(Steve Griffin | The Salt Lake Tribune) Senate President Wayne Niederhauser, R-Sandy laughs with Senate Majority Whip, Sen. J. Stuart Adams, R-Layton, as they speak to the media as Senate leaders make themselves available for questions in the Senate President's offices at the State capitol in Salt Lake City Thursday Feb. 15, 2018.

16 minutes ago

There aren't many times when a legislator makes an honest admission about something that reflects poorly on him. But Senate President Wayne Niederhauser did just that earlier this week.

Confronted with a question by Tribune reporter Lee Davidson about a bill to grant EnergySolutions, the Legislature's biggest donor, a \$1.7 million break on state fees, Niederhauser said he wanted to see proof of the donations before he would comment.

So reporters Dan Harrie and Taylor Stevens crunched the numbers, and it doesn't look good for Niederhauser or the rest of the legislators who voted for the bill.

The analysis of donations from 2016-2018 showed "a huge disparity in donations to those who voted yes and the relatively few who voted no."

In the Senate, those who voted for the bill received an average of \$2,541 each from EnergySolutions, for a total contribution of \$43,200. Of the six senators who voted no, only two received donations – Sen. Todd Weiler received \$2,000 and Sen. Wayne Harper received \$500.

Neiderhauser took \$7,000 during that time period, and he received the highest amount, and was one of only four donees, this year.

In the House, the 61 members who voted for the bill received an average of \$971 each, for a total of \$59,225. The 11 members who voted against it received nothing.

While 26 of the senators and representatives who voted for the bill did not receive any donations, as Neiderhauser admitted, “There’s no question that donations probably have some influence. That’s reality.” “It takes money to get elected,” after all.

Senate Majority Whip Stuart Adams, R-Layton, tried to downplay the influence money has on legislators’ decision-making. Adams justified the bill based on residents in Tooele who think that EnergySolutions is good for the economy.

But he would be hard-pressed to argue that outside of Tooele, Utahns think it’s a good idea to give a nuclear waste depository company a break on state fees to the tune of \$1.7 million dollars when all indications show the company is already doing very well.

Need more proof that money has influence? Another bill making its way through the House is trying to limit the number of public employees who can testify at committee hearings or lobby for bills. Because do you know what public employees don’t have? Money.

In reality, \$1,000 to 2,000 a year is a paltry sum to most legislators, hardly worth Neiderhauser’s admission.

But his admission is disconcerting nonetheless.

We all know that money talks. We just don't want to hear about it.