



Legislator gets donations after backing medical marijuana, gambling expansion

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Lou Lang isn't a household name, but the veteran state legislator is well-known to many as the driving force behind one of the biggest changes to Illinois' law books in decades: the legalization of medical marijuana.

The Democratic state representative from Skokie also been showered with political donations given by parties interested in what's expected to be a multimillion-dollar industry in Illinois.

A Better Government Association review found that Lang's campaign fund collected about \$50,000 in donations flowing from would-be pot growers and sellers, lobbyists who counted them as clients, and other interested parties since 2009 (the year Lang first introduced medical marijuana legislation). The donations are an example of Lang's ability to draw money from his support of laws on a host of contentious topics. "I take on a lot of very controversial and difficult legislation because I enjoy taking on things that no one else will take on," Lang told the BGA.

Under the new law championed by Lang, doctors will be able to prescribe marijuana to treat the symptoms of certain chronic and terminal illnesses. State government, which will oversee medicinal pot when it hits the market, likely next year, decided earlier this year which businesses will be allowed to grow and sell marijuana.

The law, signed by then-Gov. Pat Quinn in 2013, precludes holders of medical marijuana dispensary or cultivation licenses from making campaign donations to politicians.

But people and companies seeking licenses — as well as lobbyists, lawyers or others representing the industry — are free to give to political funds.

Lang said donations don't drive his agenda on marijuana or anything else. He said he's only motivated to raise revenue for local governments and help vulnerable people.

"No one would be able to say I took a single dollar from anybody for the wrong purposes," he said. The 65-year-old Lang, a onetime candidate for Illinois governor, said campaign money likely flows to him because of his leadership role as deputy majority leader and his position on the powerful Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, which makes sure laws for things such as medical marijuana are implemented correctly.

Lang is still pushing forward on medical marijuana legalization, sponsoring a follow-up bill that would extend the state's pilot program beyond a 2017 sunset. He also sponsored a bill that passed the General Assembly last month that would decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana, making it a petty offense — rather than a misdemeanor — punishable by a \$100 ticket.

Marijuana is the latest in a series of legislative drives that help build Lang's reputation as a go-to lawmaker on so-called vice issues.

Money trail

Whether it's gambling, booze or tobacco, Lang's campaign coffers benefit from related contributions. Lang's campaign fund is one of the largest for a state lawmaker, with more than \$1 million. During his 28 years as an Illinois legislator, Lang received more than \$6.56 million in donations, state campaign finance records show.

An analysis by the BGA found that gambling interests donated a total of almost half a million dollars to Lang's campaign fund, while liquor and tobacco representatives together donated about \$300,000.

Political contributions from health care representatives, including nursing homes (\$300,000) and pharmaceutical-makers (\$60,000) rival the tobacco and liquor industry donations. Lang noted that he has a number of nursing homes in his 16th House District, covering Chicago's Far North Side and parts of Skokie and Morton Grove.

Other large contributors include payday and title loan companies, which collectively gave Lang's campaign more than \$100,000. He's also taken about \$1 million from labor groups.

Before his work on medical marijuana, Lang earned a reputation for pushing expanded legalized gambling in Illinois, proposing dozens of bills over the years seeking to increase wagering in casinos and at horse tracks, with slot machines, video consoles and the Internet.

He was among the forces behind the controversial 2009 legislation that allowed municipalities to offer video gambling. Since video gambling went live in 2012, thousands of machines have sprouted in thousands of locations, including florist shops, truck stops, cafes and coin laundries. Even Lang said the law went well beyond the original intention.

Lang recused himself in May 2013 from what he called "broad-based gaming" legislation after critics howled that he had a conflict of interest. He was sponsoring a bill that would have allowed five new casinos, including in Chicago, the south suburbs, Rockford and Danville.

The law firm Odelson & Sterk was hired by Rockford around the same time to handle workers' compensation and flooding claims cases. The firm also represented Calumet City, which has been mentioned over the years as a candidate for a casino. Lang is an attorney "of counsel" for that law firm, which represents numerous municipal governments and school boards. He also is affiliated with the law firm Goldberg Weisman Cairo, which specializes in personal injury cases.

"It was not a conflict of interest at all, but the perception that it might be caused me to say, 'I don't want to damage the issue,' " Lang said.

As for current casino legislation, Lang said he has not been involved in any way.

Who benefits?

Lang's campaign contributions from the gambling industry include at least \$78,100 from members of the Bluhm family. Billionaire Neil Bluhm is chairman of the venture that owns Des Plaines' Rivers Casino, the state's newest and most lucrative casino.

"I've been a longtime supporter of Rep. Lang," Bluhm said in a written statement. "Although we don't always agree, I am always impressed with how hard he works on behalf of the district where I grew up with my parents and how informed he is on the issues."

Gambling opponents say Lang is contributing to social problems, including drawing in low-income people who can least afford to lose money.

"The only way you grow your revenues from predatory gambling is you add more and more forms of extreme gambling into communities — that's what Lou Lang and his colleagues are doing," said Les Bernal, national director of the organization Stop Predatory Gambling. "It's a failed policy that's creating more inequality, and the only people that win are the people that run the gambling operations and a handful of public officials like Lou Lang who get campaign contributions and some favorable public relations."