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## OPINION

# Corporate cabal craves carte blanche

*Robert Steinbuch*



The Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce, private lobbyists for mega-corporations, and the Arkansas Farm Bureau, a group of private insurance companies with a name that suggests otherwise, are actively paying big bucks to campaign against the democracy-enhancing

proposed constitutional amendment that would allow the Legislature on occasion to call itself into special session. This cabal is not your friend.

Randy Zook, president and CEO of the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce, who is leading the charge to kill the proposal to enhance the people's voice through their elected representatives, said his big-money cabal hopes to spend "a mid-size figure" to buy the defeat of expanded democracy.

For shame.

Stanley Hill, vice president of public affairs and government relations for the Arkansas Farm Bureau, is the other co-chairman of the cabal. You have to appreciate the effort to re-label the title "lobbyist" into "public affairs and government relations lackey." Well, to be fair, I added the lackey part. I always knew to be skeptical of lobbyists. Now I'm skeptical of their function-dodging titles as well.

"Our Legislature already meets once every year, plus one or more special sessions called by the governor most years, and that's enough to take care of the business of the people ... Voters benefit from having a truly representative 'citizen legislature,' and if Issue 1 passes, making it harder for the average Arkansan to serve, we will move even closer to a full-time legislature." Zook said in a news release.

Wrong, misleading, and wrong again!

Our Legislature meets every second year to enact substantive legislation. And when they do, they convene for a few months. During off-cycle years, the Legislature meets for funding issues. And when the Legislature meets at the governor's call, they do so to address the issues that he or she designates.

So, the Legislature meets a mere 90 days every two years to address issues brought by and for the people. That might be long enough for Randy Zook, who prefers to advocate for mandating vaccines and other ways to interfere with the private lives of employees of mega-corporations without the oversight of the Legislature, but it isn't necessarily enough to address the immediate concerns of Arkansans facing real-life problems.

Indeed, Zook fared poorly last time he faced off with the Legislature. During a televised committee hearing, Zook told Alan Clark, veteran chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and solid conservative, that the Chamber wouldn't commit to covering the medical expenses of employees who were forced—pursuant to a corporate mandate—to take a vaccination they didn't want, which caused them longterm side effects. No wonder Zook doesn't want the Legislature in session any more than it is.

Thus, the Chamber of Mega-Corporations, uh, Commerce, is fast to seek to control virtually every aspect of employees' lives, not so fast to pay for it, and even less willing to explain it to an in-session Legislature. That's not a good look.

Furthermore, special sessions typically only last a few days. Why does Zook think they'll take all year? This is just a scare tactic: "Beware of the boogeyman permanent Legislature; it's coming for you. But don't worry, the lobbyists for mega-corporations will protect you from your duly elected representatives." Color me unconvinced.

State Rep. Fran Cavanaugh from Walnut Ridge was the House sponsor of the proposed amendment. I don't know her, but I'd vote for her given her sponsorship of this proposal alone. And equal kudos to Breanne Davis from Russellville for taking the lead in the Senate.

Cavanaugh aptly said that Issue 1 is aimed at balancing the power of the legislative and the executive branches, given that the Legislature has lost power over many years. She said that Arkansans would have benefited during the pandemic from lawmakers being able to call a special session to be more responsive to their constituents. She's right!

Moreover, Issue 1 would only permit the General Assembly to convene in a session either by a joint written proclamation of both the speaker of the House and the Senate president pro tempore or through the signatures of two-thirds of the members of the 35-member Senate and 100-member House of Representatives.

Try corralling those cats. It's no easy task. The Legislature will not be calling itself into session very often. Those very citizen legislators that Zook is seeking to, uh, protect can make that decision by themselves without his paternalistic assistance.

Collaborator Hill from the league of extraordinary insurance companies said: "Since our state's government was reorganized in 1874, only the sitting governor can call for special sessions of the General Assembly/ Legislature and set the agenda for these sessions ... It is a system that has served our state well for almost 150 years and provides a balance between the executive and legislative branches of our government." Horses and buggies had also served our state well for 100 years, pedantic history lesson aside, until automobiles were invented. It's time to update. In fact, lawmakers in 36 other states have the power to call themselves into special session according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Why does Hill want Arkansas to stay in the dark ages, riding in horse-drawn carriages? Maybe it's because the lobbyists like to play when the Legislature is away.

This is your right to know.

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