

Lock the revolving job door in Juneau

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COMMENT

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We've got a revolving door in Juneau. Top government officials who make decisions worth millions to corporations like Exxon resign or get fired, and before their \$1,100 Areon executive chair has reached room temperature, the official lands a lobbying job with Exxon or some other big corporation. With the change in administration, the revolving door has been turning a lot lately. Every time it turns, the stink gets worse.

Consider the case of Kevin Jardell, Gov. Frank Murkowski's legislative director. It's not hard to imagine a circumstance where he could have facilitated -- we're just imagining now -- a small change in a critical tax bill that favored one big oil company, say Exxon Mobil, over the interests of, say, Conoco Phillips and BP.

I've seen no evidence to suggest Jardell did this. What I know is he resigned from his state job Dec. 4 and exactly one month later registered as a lobbyist for Exxon and two other outfits. Exxon, which dumped its long-serving Juneau lobbyist to hire Jardell, is paying him almost \$11,000 per month, plus expenses. According to the Alaska Public Offices Commission, his lobbying earnings in 2007 will total at least \$156,000. Not bad for someone whose track record as a state-paid lobbyist was pretty much a failure.

The problem isn't just Jardell or Exxon, it's our complacency in overlooking how people with the opportunity to do favors for powerful corporations are leaving their state jobs to take cushy contracts or jobs with these same corporations. Here's a very partial list:

- Marty Rutherford in 2005 resigned as deputy commissioner of natural resources to lobby for Foothills Pipe Lines Alaska, a wholly owned subsidiary of TransCanada Pipelines, a Canadian company seeking to build the North Slope natural gas pipeline. She later returned to state service and is currently acting natural resources commissioner.
- Kevin Duffy resigned as commissioner of fish and game in 2005, immediately taking a job earning a much higher salary as executive director of the At-Sea Processors Association, a trade organization comprising seven corporations Duffy regulated from his state-designated seat on the North Pacific Fishery Management Council.
- Denny DeWitt, who served as a special assistant in the governor's office, resigned Jan. 8 and submitted his lobbyist registration to APOC on Jan. 12. DeWitt will lobby for the National Federation of Independent Business and World Wide Technology, a St. Louis-based technology firm that in November, just before Murkowski left office, won a \$15 million state contract to replace 15,000 telephones.

In 1986, in the wake of a procurement scandal that led to the near impeachment of Gov. Bill Sheffield, the Legislature approved a tough Executive Ethics Act that locked the revolving door for two years after an official left the state payroll. But successive attorneys general, first under former Gov. Tony Knowles and later under Murkowski, wrote a series of opinions that "interpreted" the prohibition virtually out of

existence.

Gov. Sarah Palin has proposed ethics legislation intended to close this loophole. More power to her. Unfortunately, the bill is vague and a key term is undefined. More troubling, even as Palin's legislative lawyers were drafting her bill, other lawyers deeper in the bowels of the Department of Law were sending get-out-of-jail-free letters to Jardell and others, telling them the current law doesn't apply to their situation.

They've been sending these letters for years, each one stretching the loophole a little wider than before. They do this, I suppose, because most governors have a difficult time recruiting the people they want. Removing the barriers to taking a high-paying job later makes recruitment easier. "No problem," say the governor's attorneys. "Wiggling out of inconvenient legal constraints is what we know how to do."

According to Transparency International, a Berlin-based nonprofit group that analyzed patterns of bribery and political corruption in 90 countries around the world, corruption is first and foremost a crime of opportunity. They say the best way to reduce corruption is obvious: Remove the opportunity. Here in Juneau, we've been doing just the opposite. It's time we poured a load of quick-curing cement in the revolving door.

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