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## My turn: Put a stop to the revolving door

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

Consider the case of Kevin Jardell, former-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, ConocoPhillips and BP.

I've seen no evidence to suggest Jardell did this. What I know is he resigned from his state job 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 2003 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 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 comprised of 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 to an official for two years after he or she 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 chiseling 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.

According to Transparency International, a nonprofit that analyzes patterns of bribery and political corruption around the world, corruption is first and foremost a crime of opportunity. 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.

- Gregg Erickson is a Juneau economic consultant and editor of the Alaska Budget Report.

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