

# 'Pay to play' politics is bad, but it works: business survey

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By Greg Hinz

Chicago-area business leaders strongly believe that donating to a local politician or hiring a high-powered lobbyist adds to the city's already serious corruption problems. But, according to a new survey, they also overwhelmingly believe that paying to play works.

The survey also finds that business leaders, by an 8-to-1, margin say that "things in Chicago are . . . off on the wrong track," with 79 percent negative and just 10 percent positive.

The online survey of 428 Chicago-area decision-makers was conducted by Crain's Custom Media in May for the Committee of Economic Development of the Conference Board, a nonpartisan, business-led policy group. Those polled by email indicated that their companies had at least \$1 million in revenue last year and that they either hold a top management slot or serve on the firm's board.

The results "are indicative of the constant sort of low-level scandals that seem to happen on a regular basis in Chicago," said committee senior advisor Cindy Canary, a well-known local reformer.

"I don't think we're going to see corporate leaders unilaterally disarming," she added. "But I do think people can come to the table to discuss reform."

Overall, these business execs have a low opinion of Chicago government. For instance, 92 percent say that the influence of money in Chicago politics is "bad," with a majority of 53 percent indicating things are getting worse.

Similarly, 88 percent say the "ethical behavior" of Chicago officials over the past five years is at least a "somewhat serious issue," 92 percent say big campaign donors add to Chicago corruption, 93 percent say that lobbying city officials impacts the level of city corruption, and 92 percent agree that the city suffers from "crony capitalism . . . favoritism in the form of tax breaks, government grants and other incentives."

Asked whether officials listen more to voters or lobbyists, 81 percent answer lobbyists.

Respondents were not directly asked if they or their companies engaged in "pay to play" conduct. But they make clear their sense that companies do what they think will help them get ahead. Asked if companies that use paid lobbyists and/or make political contributions "gain a business advantage," 91 percent say yes. Only 3 percent answer no.

And those surveyed definitely feel a need to play the game. Exactly half indicate there is "a lot" of pressure on business leaders to donate and hire lobbyists, with 38 percent saying there's at least "some" pressure.

The survey also finds a fair amount of backing for a New York-style system to finance campaigns for municipal office via a small donor matching program, combined with caps on overall spending. Fifty-eight percent say they'd support implementing such a program, while 47 percent say it would at least somewhat improve the quality of candidates for municipal office.

Those from middle-market firms tended to be the most supportive; executives with large companies were the least in favor.