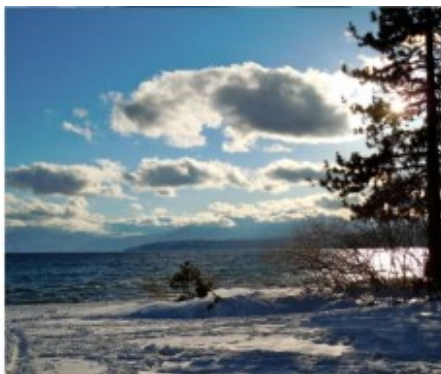


NV TRPA board member's Lobbying work questioned

By Anjeanette Damon, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – At a legislative hearing this month on a controversial bill that could determine the future of the bi-state agency tasked with protecting the Lake Tahoe environment, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency board member Steve Robinson urged the committee to preserve Nevada's ability to abolish the agency altogether.

In his view as a board member, the threat that Nevada could pull out of the agency was the catalyst for recent progress toward fixing the dysfunctional agency in charge of overseeing development and environmental protection in the Lake Tahoe Basin.



Politics cast more clouds over Lake Tahoe than Mother Nature. Photo/LTN file

But Robinson, who represents Nevada's Conservation and Natural Resources Department on the TRPA board, never mentioned that he is also a contract lobbyist for a firm that pushed through the state law allowing Nevada to abandon its decades-old compact with California to protect Lake Tahoe in the first place.

Robinson was testifying on Senate Bill 229, a measure backed by environmentalists that would preserve the bi-state Compact by repealing the 2011 law allowing Nevada to withdraw from the TRPA if changes aren't made to ease development around the lake.

The hearing highlighted Robinson's dual role as both lobbyist and TRPA board member – a role that environmentalists say represents an inherent conflict of interest when it comes to protecting Lake Tahoe.

Robinson is the former government affairs director for R&R Partners, one of the largest lobbying firms in Nevada that was retained by Tahoe businesses to shepherd through the 2011 law, Senate Bill 271. Robinson is no longer an employee of R&R Partners, but is contracted with them to lobby for two mining companies.

Robinson, and the state official who gave him the job on the TRPA board, say he is able to keep the two roles separate. Robinson said he lobbies only on mining issues, not any Tahoe-related legislation.

"I was a bureaucrat for 30 years, both at the federal level and the state level," Robinson said. "I think I know what conflicts are, and this ain't one of them."

But critics argue it's impossible to dismiss R&R Partners' role as chief cheerleader for SB271.

"Given the role R&R played in passing SB271, it certainly concerns me," said Kyle Davis, political director for the Nevada Conservation League, of Robinson's dual role. "He's been very good at making it clear when he's working on TRPA issues and when he's working on R&R issues. But the TRPA issues are completely intertwined with what R&R does. I don't know how you keep the two separate."

Leo Drozdoff, director of the Nevada Department of

Conservation and Natural Resources, appointed Robinson to the TRPA board in January 2011. Typically, Robinson's seat on the board is held by the director of the department.

But Drozdoff said he wanted someone with more expertise on Tahoe issues, as well as the time to be a truly engaged board member. He selected Robinson, who has worked as a senior staff member for three Nevada governors and is the former deputy director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department.

"We don't see it as a conflict," said Pete Ernaut, president of R&R Partners. "He asked if he could be on the board and given Steve's background, this is an appointment that is well in keeping with his area of expertise."

Drozdoff said he "made no bones about" the fact Robinson worked for R&R Partners, even including that fact in the press release announcing his appointment to the TRPA board.

But Robinson's association with the lobbying firm didn't become relevant until R&R Partners took the lead role in ushering SB271 through the Legislature in 2011.

"When all this stuff came about with 271, I talked to Steve at length about it," Drozdoff said. "He said they have various firewalls in place and he's not involved in any lobbying efforts."

"But I won't disagree that it does create a bit of a conundrum."

Robinson has been heavily involved in working on the measure now before the Legislature to repeal the 2011 law. He meets informally and formally with lobbyists on both sides of the issue.

But Drozdoff said he would expect nothing less from his appointee to the board, saying the DCNR wants to broker a compromise on the issue. And he has no concerns about

Robinson's private employment.

"Yes, I am confident that when he is taking a position at the Legislature, that position is consistent with mine," Drozdoff said.

But environmental groups pushing to protect the compact aren't so sure.

They point to Robinson's testimony this month, when he took the microphone as a "neutral" witness on the bill to repeal the 2011 law but then advocated to preserve it.

"The specter of the possibility of Nevada's withdrawal was absolutely essential to changing the hearts and the minds of those on both sides," Robinson said of the recent collaborative effort from California and Nevada officials to fix inherent problems at the TRPA.

"While that legislation certainly has some faults, the option to withdraw should remain."

Darcie Goodman Collins, executive director for the League to Save Lake Tahoe, said Robinson's testimony as a TRPA board member was "inappropriate," given his business interest with R&R.

"He works for R&R lobbying firm, which represents a lot of special interests," Collins said. "In my opinion, he's not adequately and honestly representing the (state) department."

On the point of allowing Nevada to withdraw from the Compact, however, Drozdoff and Gov. Brian Sandoval tend to agree with R&R's position.

Sandoval signed SB271 in 2011, and according to Robinson, does not support the law's repeal this year. Nor does Drozdoff, who echoed R&R's argument that more time is needed to change the direction of the TRPA.

Sandoval was non-committal when asked if he is concerned about Robinson's dual role.

"I'll have to think about that," Sandoval said. "I'll chat with Leo about that."

Potential conflicts of interest abound at the Legislature, where lawmakers hold regular "day jobs" and meet only every other year. Some lawmakers work for lobbying firms, labor unions, or other companies that have business before the Legislature.

In that environment, some didn't blink an eye at Robinson's dual role.

"I hadn't really thought about it and I wasn't aware of it," said Sen. Aaron Ford, D-Las Vegas, the chairman of the Senate Natural Resources Committee that heard the repeal measure. "It doesn't sway me one way or the other, the fact he works for R&R and is also a board member. I am able to compartmentalize people's roles in certain things, but also give credence to the position stated."

But Robinson said he is confident the two roles don't conflict, particularly since he is not retained by R&R to lobby Tahoe issues.

"I know what's in my mind and my heart," Robinson said. "There are a lot of people at the Legislature involved in a lot of things, including legislators. I just don't see this as a conflict."