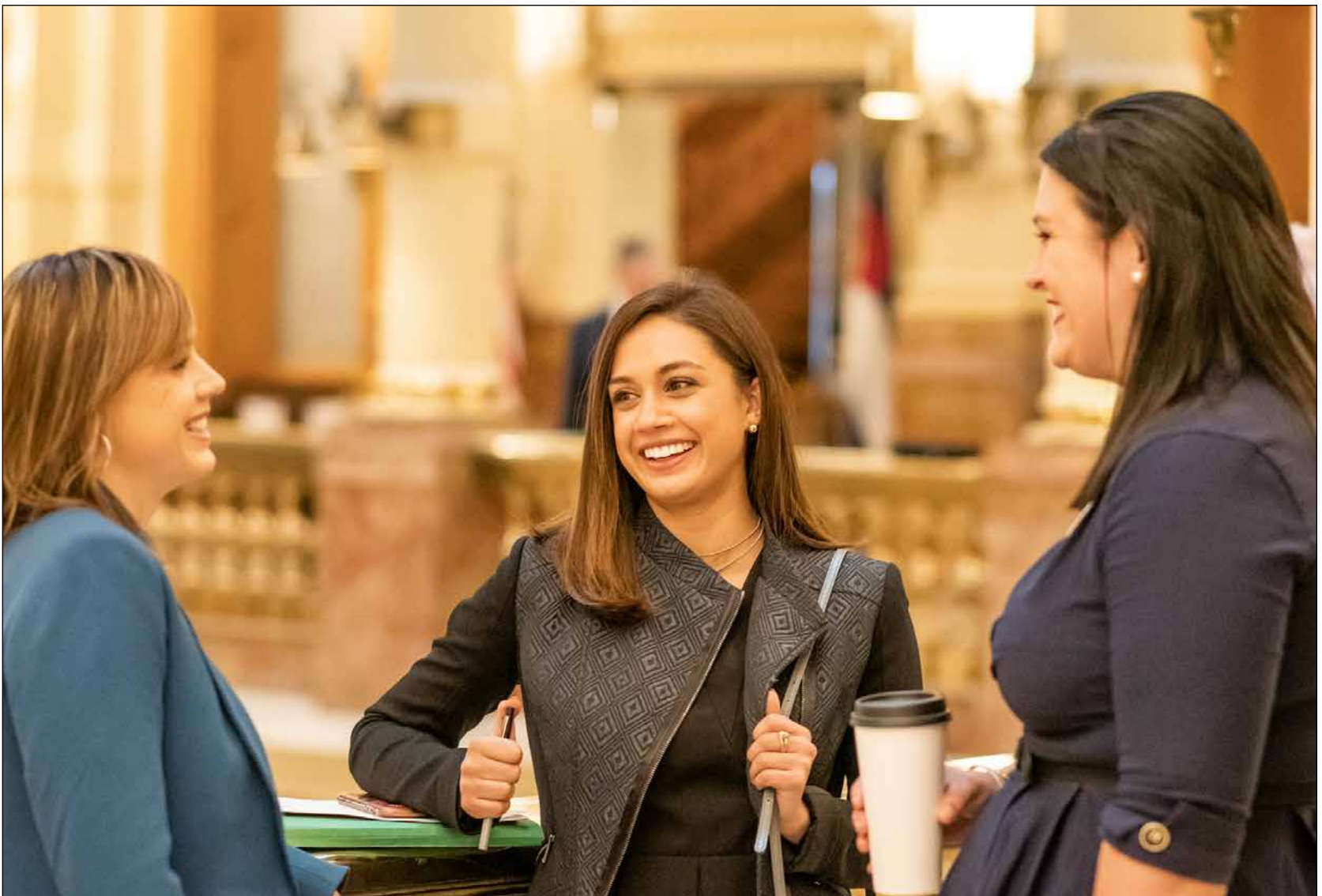


## SPECIAL REPORT

# The influencers

**Lobbying at the Capitol:** Who does the talking on Colorado's biggest issues?



ANDY COLWELL FOR COLORADO POLITICS

Colorado Legislative Services lobbyists Garin Vorthmann, left, and Zoey DeWolf, center, talk to state Rep. Bri Buentello, D-Pueblo, at the state Capitol in Denver. The Capitol is populated with lobbyists, lawyers, advisers, citizen activists, community organizers and public relations pros.

BY JOEY BUNCH • COLORADO POLITICS

“Everything’s fair in love and April,” a Colorado lobbyist posted on Facebook. The summation referred to the Colorado General Assembly, which will adjourn its four-month romp on May 3. Through this year’s session, policies and billions of dollars have been on the legislative table for sweeping programs such as all-day free kindergarten, equal pay for women, restrictions on oil and gas operations and an invitation for voters to kill conservatives’ sacred cow, the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights.

At the Colorado Capitol as in every statehouse across the country, an army of lobbyists are trying to make sure their clients get their share or their point of view heard.

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# CAPITOL

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But not even close to everyone who shapes policy and the minds of 100 elected legislators in Colorado is a registered lobbyist. To point to them and their income is like calling the woodwinds an entire symphony.

The Capitol is populated as well with lawyers, advisers, citizen activists, community organizers and public relations pros.

They all are in the ear (or at least at the bar) with your favorite lawmaker, the ones who make up their minds about how you live your life, from traffic jams and school choice to vaccinations and jail time.

The place runs on information and influence.

Lawmakers vote with their head and their heart, so the information going in matters.

Some of the most influential pros in the Capitol tell Colorado Politics that the caricature of influence, dripping with money and power, doesn't tell the whole story.

## Bad actors don't last

Most people have a cause they believe in, even it's just believing they should be able to turn a good profit in Colorado.

Empty spin doctors, brazen manipulators and other bad actors flame out quickly here, said Doug Friednash, a kingpin in city, state, national and international government. That's why the powerhouse Denver-based law and lobbying firm of Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck last year snatched up Friednash, former Gov. John Hickenlooper's chief of staff. He now chairs the firm's national political strategies practice group.

Friednash, also a former Denver city attorney under Mayor Michael Hancock, said what makes an operative valuable is whether he or she has two things: time and integrity.

Because of term limits and fickle voters, things change fast in the halls of power. Influencers forge good relationships and better reputation to become a trusted insider, he said.

"I think it's really all about relationships, and being able to maintain good relationships by providing good, honest information to people," Friednash said.

Understanding how the process works is crucial, he said.

"With term limits, so much changes in this building — term limits, Amendment 41 [a 2006 ballot measure restricting gifts to lawmakers and lobbying] — there's been so much that's been profound structural changes that's made it harder for people to impact the system," said Friednash.

## Legislative watch

Lawmakers this session showed they were uncomfortable with the state's lax oversight of lobbyists by passing a bill to improve transparency.

They cited the millions of dollars lobbyists alone are paid.

To be sure, big money changes hands in attempts to sway the General Assembly during the 120-day legislative session.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to put a dollar figure on how much gets spent on hearts, minds and cocktails, however.

The Denver Post in February compiled a painstaking database from state records on lobbyists and clients and estimated



ANDY COLWELL FOR COLORADO POLITICS

Visitors make their way to the grand staircase in the Capitol, where Coloradans convene to make laws, policies and a difference in their communities



COLORADO POLITICS FILE

State Rep. Lisa Cutter, D-Jefferson County, sponsored a measure to raise reporting requirements on lobbyists.

\$33 million was spent last year. But The Post's Nic Garcia, who reported on the expensive lobbying, acknowledged that the state's records left gaps, such as one lobbying firm listing another as a client, making it difficult to detect subcontracting that might result in double billing.

Lobbyists also pointed out to Colorado Politics that money also gets billed as public relations, legal work or community outreach, meaning the actual figure is much higher.

The Post's report caught the eye of Reps. Lisa Cutter, D-Jefferson County, and Mike Weissman, D-Aurora, with Sen. Mike Foote, D-Lafayette, who sponsored the Lobbyist Transparency Act, House Bill 1248, to raise the reporting requirements for lobbyists.

"The danger of this is that it gives lobbyist access and influence that the general public doesn't have," Cutter said in



COLORADO POLITICS FILE

Doug Friednash chairs the national political strategies practice group at Denver law and lobbying firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck.

a statement. "So if money equals speech, it is important that we know where that money is coming from."

The legislation — still making its way through the legislature at press time — would require more frequent reports from professional lobbyists about who they're representing. It also keeps lawyers from acting as lobbyists to invoke attorney-client confidentiality about shaping public policy.

"As elected officials, I believe that we should be guardians and protectors of the public trust," Weissman stated. "There is not a tremendous amount of public trust in political processes right

now. I do believe we must do what we can to shore that up. There are few better ways to do that than bring transparency to lobbying practices around this legislature and that's what this bill does."

## Existing guardrails

Amendment 41 is the 2006 constitutional amendment enacted by voters to limit gifts, donations and corruption. Friednash co-authored "The Practitioner's Guide to Amendment 41 and the Colorado Ethics Commission" for the Colorado Bar Association.

He's watched the House and Senate change leadership every two years, after

elections, which he thinks reflects the transient nature of power at the Capitol. In many other states, leaders of chambers and committees hang around sometimes for decades. Political hierarchies are predictable. Not in Colorado.

"By the time you finally understand how this building works, you're gone," Friednash said of term limits and tenuous incumbents. "So here you don't have any of that institutional knowledge or legacy, so the people who have been around this building for a long time — which I've done as state legislator, a chief of staff, the AG's office, city attorney — can help inform policy and can help understand how things work together and why things were done a certain way, and I think that provides good insight."

He understands that lobbyists, lawyers and operatives have a public reputation roughly on par with journalists.

Do they deserve it or not deserve it? "Both," Friednash said. "They're just like everybody else. There are good lobbyists and bad lobbyists. I think a lot of people see the system as broken and people having an unusual amount of power, and they want somebody to point at."

"But I don't think that's accurate. I think legislators are pretty independent, and I think most of them truly try to do the right thing for their districts all the time, even though they might have a different philosophy or approach than some of their voters. But one thing I think they all share is a need for good information to make difficult decisions. If somebody burns them once, they're not going to listen to them again, so I think



ANDY COLWELL FOR COLORADO POLITICS

Lobbyists Garin Vorthmann, left, and Melanie Layton of Colorado Legislative Services convene outside the Colorado House chambers.

the ones who succeed here are the ones who work on their reputation."

## Reminders and donations

Influencers usually remind lawmakers that their clients are sources of campaign donations.

Most legislative races are small-ball money, measured in tens of thousands, not millions. Still, 20 of the 100 House candidates raised more than \$100,000 to win a seat last November. Sixteen candidates in 17 races for Senate last year raised at least \$100,000, six topped \$200,000 and four got more than \$300,000.

Tammy Story raised \$529,378 to beat incumbent Tim Neville by 12 percentage points in Senate District 16.

You don't run races that expensive on bake sales and home-equity loans. Special interests pay the freight to get lawmakers' attention.

House Majority Leader Alec Garnett, D-Denver, raised \$43,995 in campaign donations last year, even though he didn't have an opponent. The majority leader has broad authority over how bills get assigned to committees and handled on the floor.

Garnett's campaign coffers included \$200 and \$400 donations from such diverse political action committees as the Associated Collection Agencies, the Colorado Optometrists Association, Stand for Children and the drugmaker Pfizer Inc.

Not coincidentally, Pfizer spent \$60,000 on Colorado lobbyists last year. The Associated Collection Agencies spent almost \$31,000, while Stand for Children ponied up only about \$4,500 for lobbying services, according to the Secretary of State's office.

## Seat at the table

Jenny Davies — co-founder and principal of Denver-based Progressive Promotions — has taken on clients who probably couldn't hire a high-priced lobbying firm or a lawyer. Her firm aggressively pitches stories to the media and mobilizes activists to protest at the Capitol for their causes, such as pay equity, paid family leave and a higher minimum wage.

Davies has been involved in the Colorado process for nearly 30 years.

"I'm not very interested in the political game," Davies said in her office across the street from the Capitol. "What I'm interested in is advancing policies that actually improves the lives of everyday Coloradans."

She said she likes giving underdogs and long-advocated issues a fighting chance against big-money, high-powered interests.

"In our case we work with so many nonprofits, their power comes from the grassroots," she said. "They have lots of members, whether it's just in the Denver area or statewide. We work with our clients to help them connect their grassroots — everyday working people, lower-wage workers — with the decisions that affect them every day."

Davies said Progressive Promotions understands its clients are often Davids fighting Goliaths, in terms of money and paid influence.

"We are the underdog firm," she said. "We believe that low-income people deserve a voice every much as the CEO of a big company."

Lobbyist Becky Long got a taste for that fight as a statehouse advocate for Conservation Colorado, the state's largest environmental organization.

In 2016, she joined Siegel Public Affairs to lobby for the organization and others whose interest is a clean healthy environment.

"Our firm's focus is on representing nonprofit organizations with a lens for how we can bring fairness to the legislative process," Long said. "Our clients often have limited resources and rely on us to be their voice inside the building."

"I see my role as being a conduit for the people they represent to ensure our laws aren't just made by those that have the most resources. Our state Constitution vests a great deal of power in our citizens, yet they don't always have equal footing in the political process."

## Standing in

Garin Vorthmann of Colorado Legislative Services was raised on ranch in southwest Colorado, and her husband, Chad, is the executive vice president of the Colorado Farm Bureau. She's a Colorado State University graduate with a degree in agricultural business.

She knows her way around a bull. From her view, she stands in at the Capitol for others who would rather remain among their livestock and farms.

She represents a resume of high-profile clients, but she is the go-to representative of farm and rural interests in Denver.

"I think my role and what I try to do is make sure the voices of people who don't have time to come to the Capitol are still

heard," Vorthmann said. "A farmer on the Eastern Plains, a rancher over on the Western Slope, a massage therapist that's just trying to start a small business, they have a job they have to do, a family to take care of, and their lives to live. I take their message to the Capitol and watch for issues that affect their livelihood."

Cinamon Watson, co-founder of Blue-Print Strategies, once stood in for a future president. She was on the campaign trail doing PR for George W. Bush when she stepped to a debate podium because she was about the same height as her candidate.

She met her husband at the 1996 Republican National Committee when she was working for Bob Dole.

In Colorado, over the last two decades, her name has been synonymous with winning campaigns for conservative candidates and corporate causes.

"I've been blessed to work for some great causes and candidates. I believe in their stories and their causes and most of all in their passion to do what's right and make a positive difference for Colorado," Watson said. "That ultimately makes the job much easier."

"The issues and people I work with have great stories to tell. Simply put, my job is to make sure their story and all of the facts reach voters, policy leaders and law makers."

## Something extra

Peggy O'Keefe with Clear Strategies is on the lobbyist shortlist when big business is serious about legislation, whether it's casinos, liquor, Amazon or AT&T.

Influence, to this heavy hitter, means "to provide information to legislators and the executive on legislation, on policy, provide perspective from businesses when legislators may not be familiar with the industry."

Business hire lobbyists to "help educate legislators on policy and the impacts of policy, how it affects business, how it affects the industry," O'Keefe said. "Unintended consequences are always a concern. Legislators come in oftentimes with a specific breadth of knowledge, and yet they're supposed to make policy on all kinds of issues, so we provide insight on some of those issues they might not be familiar with."

## Does it help to be a lawyer?

"I think it does. I think it provides a background on how to read legislation, the impacts of legislation, how the process works, so I think it definitely adds an extra level of expertise. Though, of course, not everyone down here is, but it's a helpful tool."

Eric Bergman says he's just the friendly face of a much larger effort. Bergman is the policy adviser to Colorado Counties Inc., the coalition of most of the state's county governments.

It's about them, not him, when he's glad-handing in the statehouse hallways.

"Any success I have in this building is largely due to the amazing people that I work with at CCI," Bergman said. "Our staff works tirelessly and are the absolute best. I am also bolstered by over 200 county commissioners and council members who are our best advocates."

"I don't think of myself as a lobbyist at all. I'm a policy geek and problem solver and collaborator — that is the true hallmark of all local government policy work. We're a small non-profit organization — no expense accounts, no \$1,000 suits."

He joked, "I get by on my boyish impetuosity, my roguish good looks and moxie."

# special report

## KEY INFLUENCERS AT THE COLORADO CAPITOL

BY JOEY BUNCH • COLORADO POLITICS

**W**ho stands out among the Capitol’s influencers? • Colorado Politics surveyed more than a dozen current and former legislators and statehouse insiders, and drew on our own institutional knowledge, to create a short list of lobbyists, lawyers, PR pros and a citizen activist from among hundreds of the finest practitioners of influence under the gold dome. • Here they are with their firms and Twitter handles.



**THE RURAL VOICE**

Garin Vorthmann

**Partner and lobbyist for Colorado Legislative Services**  
**@hangrylobby**

Nobody knows the politics of rural Colorado the way Vorthmann does. When it comes to agriculture, water and property rights, she is a marquee-name strategist. And at other times she reps clients’ interest in higher education, business, liquor and state licensure.

A third-generation ranch kid from southwest Colorado, Vorthmann started her political career in the Capitol Hill office of U.S. Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colorado, then ran the government affairs department for the Colorado Farm Bureau. She joined Colorado Legislative Services in 2007 and made partner in 2012.

Vorthmann is regarded as a Colorado water policy expert and is noted for her work on business climate issues, aligning agriculture and energy. She was lauded by the Denver Business Journal as one of Colorado’s Top Women in Energy in 2017, and she was listed in “Who’s Who in Agriculture” this year.



**THE DRIVER**

Sandra Hagen Solin

**Senior director of government relations for Kutak Rock**  
**@CapSolSolin**

For the past few years, business interests who want to see more state dollars going into transportation have waged a sustained legislative fight. Solin has been their go-to lobbyist and the leader of the statewide Fix Colorado Roads coalition. She reminds lawmakers their voters hate traffic jams, and commerce ebbs and flows with the highways.

Solin is a frequent pundit in the press, including TV, on matters of governing and politics because of her broad array of connections over her 25-year career. She also serves as senior director of government relations for the powerful national law firm Kutak Rock.

Solin also the founder, president and CEO of Capitol Solutions lobbying firm for 22 years.

Her recent reputation might be built on roads, but Solin has been the Capitol point person on business, land use, development, infrastructure, public finance, banking, technology, energy, utilities, taxation, tourism and economic development.



PHOTOS BY ANDY COLWELL FOR COLORADO POLITICS

**THE ACE**

Peggi O’Keefe

**Lawyer and lobbyist with Clear Strategies LLC**  
**@Peggiokeefe**

Known best as the highest-profile advocate for Colorado’s gambling industry, O’Keefe is armed with a law degree from the University of Denver and 20 years in the trenches of state government affairs and public policy.

She can craft statutory language one hour and guide a race for local government the next with her grasp of the political winds, working on both sides of the aisle. O’Keefe is the lobbyist favored by the big-time interests.

Her client list reads like an all-star team of corporations and clients: gaming and liquor interests, Amazon, AT&T, the Association for Accessible Medicines (generic pharmaceuticals), Enterprise Holdings, the Workers Comp Coalition, the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition, 7-Eleven and Great Western Oil and Gas, to name a few.



**THE INSIDER**

Doug Friednash

**Lawyer for Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schrek**  
**@DJFriednash**

A Denver native, Friednash is the consummate insider of Colorado politics. A former state legislator and attorney general’s office lawyer, he was former Gov. John Hickenlooper’s chief of staff and previously was the Denver city attorney for current Mayor Michael Hancock. When Friednash talks, politicians listen.

For one of the country’s most venerable law firms he advises clients on lobbying, public policy, and government relations. He chairs of the firm’s national political strategies practice group.

“Doug has spent his entire career operating at the intersection of law, business and politics and is well known for his ability to solve complex issues with practical solutions,” the firm’s staff bio of Friednash says.