

L.A. ethics officials vote to tighten lobbying rules

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After more than a year of deliberations, the Los Angeles City Ethics Commission voted today for a plan aimed at making it easier for the city to enforce its lobbying rules.

On a 3-0 vote, the commission sent to the City Council a proposal that would define a lobbyist as anyone who is paid by a client to influence a city decision — and speaks to a policymaker at least once on behalf of a client.

Under the current law, lobbyists were not required to register with the city until they had worked 30 hours over a three-month period. That information was difficult for ethics investigators to confirm.

The panel also reworked the rules for “in-house” lobbyists who work directly for a single client, such as a private company or business group. Those lobbyists won’t be required to register unless they have spoken to city policymakers at least five times in a three-month period.

Much of today’s debate centered on a plan to exempt groups whose primary purpose is to provide direct services to the economically disadvantaged, such as legal advice to low-income renters who are fighting eviction. Some small nonprofits have supported that exemption.

The commission still must draft language clarifying which groups would receive an exemption. Nevertheless, the idea drew a protest from the Central City Assn., an L.A.-based business group that warned that the commission should not require different levels of disclosure.

“Everyone who influences city policy should have to register,” said association Executive Director Carol Schatz.

Commission President Helen Zukin said the proposal would ultimately make it easier for lobbying firms to follow.

“There is no perfect ordinance,” Zukin said, adding: “I feel very comfortable with what we’ll be sending on to the City Council.”

-- David Zahniser at L.A. City Hall

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2009/07/la-ethics-officals-vote-to-tighten-lobbying-rules.html>