

Inside Southern Strategy, connections help

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In 1996, when Republicans took over the state Legislature, Paul Bradshaw lobbied for just three clients: Advanced Drainage Systems of Orlando, the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and St. Philip Towing of Tampa.

David Rancourt was a \$63,000-a-year lobbyist for the secretary of state, and John Thrasher was working his way up the leadership ladder in the House.

Today the three sit atop Southern Strategy Group Inc., a Tallahassee lobbying firm not 5 years old that illustrates how fast wealth can accumulate for lobbyists with connections. Their 80-plus clients include AT&T, Time Warner, Tampa Electric, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays and Walt Disney World.

Bradshaw, Rancourt and Thrasher are tight with Gov. Jeb Bush, a fact nobody in need of a lobbyist fails to notice.

Competitors complain that Southern Strategy flaunts its ties to the governor and poaches their clients. Their name for the firm: the House of Ego.

Thrasher said Southern Strategy doesn't steal business. "We pick up clients on the reputation of being business-Republican oriented lobbyists."

Southern Strategy got into the lobbying business about the time Gov. Bush started pushing to have private business take over an array of government functions. Businesses that hire Southern Strategy have fared well getting state contracts, including:

Bearing Point, which got a share of a \$150-million state technology contract; BlueCross BlueShield, \$2.7-million a month to manage a state employee health care contract; Caremark, \$153-million last year for prescription drug services for state employees; Infinity Inc., \$13.3-million last year for computer software; Capital Health Plan, some \$12.7-million a year to provide an HMO for state employees.

Bush acknowledges that some friends and staffers turned lobbyists use their relationships as "a marketing tool" to get clients. "But it doesn't help them get through to me. They have to succeed on the merits."

Bradshaw met Bush in September 1994, the day former Attorney General Jim Smith dropped his campaign for governor and threw his support to Bush. Bradshaw had been helping Smith.

A lawyer, Bradshaw was issues coordinator for Bush's 1998 campaign. He helped craft Bush's education policy and helped write Bush's second inaugural address - the one in which the governor stressed family values and envisioned state government buildings empty of state employees.

Working on the 1998 campaign, Bradshaw met campaign manager Sally Harrell, who would become the governor's first chief of staff. Both divorced, then married each other.

In 1998, in documents filed in his divorce, Bradshaw reported his assets: \$4,500 in the bank and a bright-yellow '74 Bronco. His net worth: negative \$2,000.

The next year, Bradshaw started Southern Strategy Group. By 2002, his lobbying income topped \$300,000; income from other sources topped \$1.1-million. Goodbye '74 Bronco, hello vintage Porsche.

Though Sally Bradshaw left the administration late in 2000 to have a baby, she still participates in many of Bush's decisions; last year she screened candidates to replace Lt. Gov. Frank Brogan.

The Bradshaws live in the woods in Gadsden County, on a 19-acre estate they call Blue Dog farm, valued at about \$600,000. Last year they bought a \$1.5-million vacation home in Montana from Florida State University President T.K. Wetherell. Their third home, rented to Mrs. Bradshaw's parents, is on a golf course at Sandestin in the Panhandle.

David Rancourt's ties to Bush date to 1998, when he joined the governor's transition team. As deputy chief of staff in the first Bush administration, Rancourt screened appointees for jobs.

He left in late 1999 to join Southern Strategy. Many of the governor's staff and agency heads that Southern Strategy lobbyists call on every day owe at least part of their success to Rancourt.

Rancourt's own success has become a bit controversial: His neighbors are in an uproar over the home he just built in Tallahassee. It's four times the size of others in the area, ringed by a tall concrete wall that neighbors blame for flooding problems.

Assessed at \$2-million, it has 10,000 square feet of living space - the master bedroom alone is 2,700 square feet - a two-story circular turret, a personal gym and a five-car garage.

Rancourt also is building a barn on a \$300,000 piece of property he owns east of town.

Since leaving the governor's staff in 1999, Rancourt has become something of a land baron: He bought a home for his parents in Lakeland, bought and sold an interest in a South Florida development company and bought and sold an \$800,000 beachfront lot on St. George Island.

Southern Strategy's vice president is John Thrasher, the governor's close friend and sometime golf partner. As House speaker in 1998-99, Thrasher delivered votes during Bush's most accomplished period as governor.

A Jacksonville lawyer with close ties to the state's medical community, Thrasher divides his time between an \$80,000 townhome in Tallahassee, a \$660,000 home on the St. Johns River and a \$394,000 mountain home in North Georgia.

Together Thrasher, Rancourt and Bradshaw own Southern Strategy Group Assets, which has bought more than \$2-million worth of prime property in downtown Tallahassee.

Bradshaw owns interests in Red Hotel LLC and Blue Dog Investments, which own several commercial tracts in Tallahassee.

The third color in the trio, White House Fellows LLC, is owned by Bradshaw, Rancourt and former Bush communications director Cory Tilley. White House Fellows LLC owns an \$800,000 office building in the historic area downtown.

Since leaving government, the three top men at Southern Strategy have received gubernatorial appointments. Bush named Bradshaw to head the committee that studied the state's controversial growth management law. He appointed Rancourt to the Florida Elections Commission and Thrasher to the FSU board of trustees. Bradshaw also represents Florida in the state pension fund's lawsuit against Enron.

Other Southern Strategy lobbyists are Tom Herndon, former chief of staff for Gov. Lawton Chiles; Chris Dudley, former chief of staff for Brogan; and James T. Moore, former director of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

Nine days ago, the state awarded a \$13-million contract to Motorola for a system that links public safety radios across the state. While running the FDLE, Moore asked the state to budget money for the contract; after joining Southern Strategy, he lobbied for Motorola.

Rancourt and Bradshaw would not discuss their business.

Thrasher said Southern Strategy's clients don't gain much from his close friendship with the governor.

"I talk to him when I can, but I try not to abuse the relationship," Thrasher said. "Occasionally he will ask me about something. But I don't take a list over and say, 'Governor, can you do this?' He would kick me out."

Caption: PHOTO, MICHAEL RONDOU PHOTO, (2)

The house David Rancourt built caused a stir even among lobbying colleagues accustomed to excess (exterior). Paul Bradshaw John Thrasher

Edition: 0 SOUTH PINELLAS

Section: NATIONAL

Page: 13A

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