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Are Texas Lawmakers' Business Ties with Public Entities a Conflict of Interest?

Like most higher education institutions, Houston Community College officials had a lot they wanted state legislators to do for them in Austin earlier this year. The school found a champion in a veteran Democratic senator from Dallas.

Sen. Royce West, who sits on both the higher education and finance committees, came through big for HCC and other community colleges, shepherding dual-credit legislation — which an HCC administrator called a “high-priority opportunity” — through a committee, the floor of the Texas Senate and onto the desk of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott.

Weeks before West helped House Bill 1638, which strengthened connections between community colleges and four-year universities, pass the Senate, HCC gave his law firm, West & Associates, a place in its legal services pool — a list of pre-approved attorneys HCC chooses from when it has legal needs.

Since 2016, public entities have had to reveal the businesses they have large contracts with. These “1295 disclosures” reveal numerous legislators among the contractors — and some of those lawmakers have sponsored or voted on bills that help those same public entities.

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THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

BY NEIL THOMAS AUG. 9, 2017 12 AM