

# Lobbying Stampede Breaks Out as Window Narrows for Next Stimulus

By Ben Brody, Naomi Nix and Megan Wilson | May 18, 2020 4:00AM ET

A socially distant lobbying stampede has broken out in Washington for what may well be the last major stimulus bill to address the coronavirus pandemic.

Marijuana dispensaries want access to banking services, home builders want tax credits for constructing low-income residences, potato growers want to be paid for excess supply.

Even the lobbyists are lobbying for a bailout.

As the economic legislation winds its way through Congress, special interests are vying to impress lawmakers with the magnitude of their losses from the pandemic.

President Donald Trump has said he's not interested in the \$3 trillion package drafted by House Democrats and approved on Friday night. Majority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) doesn't plan to move on any Republican alternative until June at the earliest, according to an aide.

With any compromise still weeks away, there's still a window for lobbyists to get their wish lists in front of lawmakers. Democrats want money for state and local governments and to expand direct cash payments and unemployment insurance. Republicans are pushing to give employers temporary immunity from worker lawsuits to help speed re-openings.

"When there's one moving train in town, everyone is trying to jump on it," said Lisa Gilbert, vice president of legislative affairs at the advocacy group [Public Citizen](#). "Many different niche businesses and individuals are impacted and hoping to find relief," she added. "This brings lobbyists out of the woodwork."

Some of the asks have little to do with the coronavirus outbreak as interest groups resurrect long-sought goals, such as the cannabis industry's bid for access to banking and retailers' calls for a de-escalation of Trump's trade wars.

Because of stay-at-home orders, lobbyists are pressing their cases via Zoom video meetings, speaking at digital "hearings," dashing off coalition letters, and texting or calling lawmakers and staffers instead of in-person meetings on Capitol Hill.

## **Corporate liability protection spurs debate**

Several of Washington's most powerful business groups, including the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#), are pushing to limit lawsuits if workers, customers, vendors and others think they've been exposed to the virus on business premises.

McConnell has said such curbs are crucial to protecting the economy in a reopening and that Congress must to agree to change the current liability system before he'd agree to aid to states facing huge budget shortfalls.

Although Democrats long have resisted any steps to limit the ability of groups and individuals to file lawsuits, Pelosi has indicated she's open to the idea of protecting businesses that follow government regulations and guidelines and some moderate Democrats have expressed support for some liability protections.

#### **Lobbying and trade groups lost revenue**

More than half of the trade associations expect to lose more than \$100,000 this year because of canceled events and conferences that generate revenue, according to data from the [American Society of Association Executives](#).

The group has gained bipartisan support to expand a forgivable loan program for small firms to include non-profits such as trade associations, chambers of commerce, and tourism bureaus -- some of which engage in lobbying. ASAE wants access to stimulus loans under the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program, although House Democrats have [moved](#) to keep lobbyists among the non-profits from getting the money.

#### **Retailers gunning for tax credits, unemployment benefits**

The Retail Leaders Industry Association -- which represents big box stores such as [Walmart Inc.](#), [Target Corp.](#), and [Best Buy Co. Inc.](#) -- is backing a change to legislation to allow workers to keep receiving supplemental unemployment benefits if they take on part-time work because of concerns that those benefits make it hard for employers to entice workers back.

The group has also been pushing lawmakers on key committees to support a tax credit for stores that make improvements to mitigate disease spread, said Austen Jensen, the retail association's senior vice president of government affairs. Efforts could include installing shields in front of cash registers, Jensen said.

The association has also been among groups that support establishing an insurance program to compensate companies for future losses related to Covid-19 because firms haven't been able to collect on business interruption policies to cover pandemic-related losses.

The [National Retail Federation](#) wants, among other things, a national infrastructure plan and relief from tariffs -- both longstanding demands. It's also pushing for a rent-forgiveness program for businesses and families and for protections against credit score changes.

#### **Pot growers angle for access to bank services**

A coalition of groups representing the cannabis industry seeks legislation that would give the growers, dispensers and others access to banking and financial services, rather than having to rely on cash. The industry said in a [letter](#) that cash transactions increase the risk of spreading the virus. A provision to give marijuana farmers access to financial services is already included in the Democrats' stimulus proposal.

Potato farmers faced with a sudden drop in demand when restaurants, hotels and schools closed their doors, are pressing Congress to give more money to the Agriculture Department to buy up crops from the \$4 billion-per-year industry, which is struggling with a \$300 million oversupply.

"If USDA doesn't step in right now and buy a substantial amount of these potatoes," said Kam Quarles, a 30-year lobbying veteran who leads the National Potato Council, "the negative impacts of this on family farmers are going to echo, at minimum, into the fall of 2021."

#### **Distillers press for relief from taxes, tariffs**

Distillers want Congress to [suspend](#) federal excise taxes on domestic and imported distilled products, while making permanent an excise tax break for craft beverages that expires at the end of the year. They also want tariff relief, after a trade dispute between the U.S. and the European Union led to a duty on American whiskey, and have called for the creation of an industry stabilization fund.

Several trade groups are also seeking to write off losses from extending credit to customers. They include groups related to bakers, florists, wine and beer wholesalers and air-conditioning and roofing contractors. The [National Association of Home Builders](#) and the [National Association of Realtors](#), at the same time, are [doubling down](#) on their longtime pushes for tax policies meant to spur the construction of low-income housing.

#### **Sporting goods lobby pushes for preservation action**

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, a coalition of 31 national trade associations representing sporting goods businesses and recreation sites, sent a [letter](#) calling for lawmakers to allocate \$900 million a year to a government fund helping to preserve land and water for public use. Another trade group, the [Outdoor Industry Association](#), is pushing funding for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, money for states and municipalities to build parks and trails to "help mitigate the worst impacts of future natural disasters."

Tori Emerson Barnes, executive vice president of public affairs and policy at the [U.S. Travel Association](#), also wants a temporary travel tax credit for individuals to expense meals, lodging, transportation and more when the economy opens up again.

#### **Nursing homes, senior facilities seek funds**

LeadingAge, a group that represents non-profit nursing homes, assisted living facilities and low-income senior housing communities, is asking for \$100 billion as well as increased access to telehealth services, hazard pay for workers, Medicaid funding and low-income housing assistance. Argentum, which represents for-profit assisted living facilities, is asking Congress for \$20 billion to cover the costs of protective equipment and increased wages. It's also seeking access to the small business aid for senior living companies.

**States pleading for aid for battered budgets**

Public employee unions and governors say state aid is essential to support programs that are stretched to the breaking point by the virus crisis.

"If they don't act, people are going to see more trash in their streets, more broken lights, fewer cops on the beat, dirtier tap water or longer 911 response times," said Lee Saunders, president of the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#) labor union. The bipartisan [National Governors Association](#) is also [urging](#) the passage of \$500 billion in aid to shore up budgets and address the costs of the pandemic.

**Small business advocates call for expanded relief program**

Lawmakers and advocates for small businesses have also called for many changes to the SBA's PPP program, which offers loans of as much as \$10 million that can become grants if the proceeds are used for payroll and certain expenses for two months.

The Democrats' proposal would allow businesses to receive the loans through the end of the year, spend the proceeds over 24 weeks and make other changes regarding which firms are eligible and how loan proceeds can be spent.

**Chamber gets behind aid for restaurants, hotels**

Other trade groups are also looking at policy issues after the economy restarts. The Chamber of Commerce, for instance, has begun discussing how to extend existing federal aid programs for businesses such as restaurants, hotels and events venues that will likely continue to suffer under occupancy restrictions for months after states have begun to reopen, according to the group's chief policy officer, Neil Bradley.

He said talks were in the early stages. Still, a program could resemble a modification of current small business aid or the employee retention tax credit, he said.

"You're looking at a number of industry categories where well more than half of the people who were employed a month ago are now unemployed," Bradley said.

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