



Pay to Play No More? Levine Act (SB 1439)

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In 1982, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that several California Coastal Commissioners had received large campaign donations from persons with applications pending before them.¹ The *Times*' investigation revealed a pattern of questionable – if not shocking – conduct that included directly contacting applicants with pending projects to request donations for political campaigns, accepting donations from attorneys and consultants who regularly represented applicants, and soliciting donations from successful applicants after voting to approve their projects. This scandal led to the enactment of the Levine Act (AB 1040), which added Government Code 84308 to the Political Reform Act of 1974. The purpose of the Levine Act is to prevent officials from using their authority as government officials to demand campaign contributions from applicants, a practice known as “pay to play.”

As originally enacted, the Levine Act's restrictions only applied to members of appointed boards and commissions, excluding city councilmembers and county supervisors in their elected roles, as opposed to any appointed roles they may have had (such as on LAFCO). This changed on January 1, 2023, as a result of SB 1439, which expanded the reach of the Levine Act to local elected officials such as city councilmembers, special district board members, and school board members even when acting in their elected roles.

State Senator Steve Glazer (D-Contra Costa County) introduced SB 1439 with the support of the government watchdog organization California Common Cause and other advocates of public accountability. Supporters of the legislation cited recent “pay to play” scandals in cities such as Los Angeles² and Huntington Park.³

Under the Levine Act as amended by SB 1439:

- Officers of an agency are prohibited from accepting, soliciting, or directing campaign contributions over \$250 from any party to, or participant in, a proceeding involving a license, permit, contract, or entitlement for use (“proceeding”) before their agency.⁴ This includes contributions from parties and their agents, and from those with a financial interest in the matter (and their agents) who merely participate in a proceeding, as by speaking at a Council meeting. The prohibition applies while the proceeding is pending and for 12 months following a final decision, when the officer knows or has reason to know the party has a financial interest in the proceeding (such as owning a home nearby). (Gov. Code, § 84308, subd. (b).) This prohibition impacts fundraising for a year after the decision.

¹ *Coastal Commission Seats Used as Fundraising Base*, Los Angeles Times (March 12, 1980), p. 1, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/385326358> [paywall].

² Zahniser, *Downtown L.A. developer donated \$50,000 before pivotal vote involving high-rise project, records show*, Los Angeles Times (Feb. 7, 2019), at <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-developer-donations-onni-20190207-story.html> [as of Aug. 15, 2023].

³ Cabrera and Patel, *Hefty Contracts for Campaign Contributors in Huntington Park*, KCET (July 26, 2021), at <https://www.kcet.org/news-community/hefty-contracts-for-campaign-contributors-in-huntington-park> [as of Aug. 15, 2023].

⁴ “License, permit, or other entitlement for use,” includes all business, professional, trade, and land use licenses and permits and all other entitlements for use, and all entitlements for land use, all contracts (other than competitively bid, labor, or personal employment contracts), and all franchises. (Gov. Code § 84308(a).)

- An officer who received a campaign contribution of more than \$250 from a party or participant, or their agents, in the past 12 months may be disqualified from participating in that proceeding. The disqualification depends on whether the officer “knowingly and willfully” accepted a contribution from a party, or if they accepted a contribution knowing the donor was a participant with a financial interest in the decision. (Gov. Code § 84308(c).) Additionally, an officer who received a contribution greater than \$250 in the preceding 12 months from a party or participant to the proceeding must disclose that fact on the record. (Gov. Code, § 84308, subd. (c).)
- Parties to and participants in a proceeding must disclose on the record if they made contributions over \$250 within the prior 12 months to any officer of the agency and are prohibited from making contributions to any officer of the agency while the proceeding is pending and for 12 months after the date a final decision is rendered. (Gov. Code § 84308, subd. (e).)

Who is Subject to SB 1439? State and local agency “officers,” including any elected or appointed officers, alternates, chief executive officers, and candidates for elective office. This includes members of city councils, county and special district boards, and appointed boards. The law does not apply to courts, the judicial branch, or the governor’s cabinet members. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18438.1.)

Curing a violation. If an officer receives a contribution that will otherwise require disqualification under Section 84308, they may participate if they return the contribution within 30 days from the time they know or should know about (1) the contribution *and* (2) the proceeding. (Gov. Code § 84308, subd. (d)(1).) Additionally, an officer who accepts, solicits, or directs a contribution of more than \$250 during the 12 months after the date a final decision may cure the violation by returning the contribution or the portion exceeding \$250 within 14 days, but only if they did not knowingly and willfully accept, solicit, or direct the prohibited contribution, and the officer’s controlled committee (or the officer if none) must maintain records of the cure. (Gov. Code § 84308, subd. (d)(2).)

FPPC Regulations. The California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) revised the regulations applicable to Section 84308, effective August 12, 2023. Key clarifying provisions include:

- **Dates.** The amendments to the Levine Act do not apply to proceedings participated in or contributions made or accepted, solicited, or directed by an officer prior to January 1, 2023, if the officer was not already subject to the Levine Act. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18438.) This regulation codifies the FPPC’s *Kendrick* opinion (No. O-22-002, December 22, 2022). As noted below, Senator Glazer objects to this conclusion and has asked the Attorney General to opine otherwise, but that may not occur by the end of 2023, when the point should be moot.
- **“Proceedings.”** A “proceeding” includes any proceeding to grant, deny, revoke, restrict, or modify a license, permit or other entitlement for use that does not solely involve purely ministerial decisions, and is applied for by the party; formally or informally requested by the party; or involves a franchise or contract other than

competitively bid, labor, and personal employment contracts. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18348.2.)

- **“Pending” proceedings.** For officers, a decision is “pending” once it is before the officer for consideration, such as an item placed on the agenda of a public meeting, or when it is reasonably foreseeable the decision will come before the officer and the officer knows or has reason to know the decision is within the jurisdiction of the agency (as when an office has notice that a formal land use application has been submitted to the agency which must come before his or her board). For a party or participant, a proceeding is pending when it is before the jurisdiction of the agency for its decision, such as when an application is filed. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18348.2.)
- **“Officer of the agency.”** An “officer” is an individual who: 1) may make, participate in making, or attempt to influence a decision in the proceeding or who exercises authority over officers who may do so, and: 2) serves in an elected position (including those appointed to a vacancy); is an appointed member of a board or commission; is a candidate for elected office or was a candidate for office in the 12 months before the proceeding; or is the chief executive of a county, city, or district. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18438.1(d).) This means a candidate who lost an election remains subject to the Levine Act prohibitions for a year if they have decisionmaking authority over a proceeding (like a Planning Commissioner who continues to serve after an unsuccessful run for Council).
- **“Agent” of a party or participant.** A person is the agent of a party to, or a participant in, a pending proceeding only if the person represents the party or participant for compensation *and* appears before or otherwise communicates with the agency for the purpose of influencing the pending proceeding. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18348.3.)
- **When an officer “knows or has reason to know” a participant has a financial interest.** An officer knows or has reason to know of a participant’s financial interest in a decision only if the officer has actual knowledge of the financial interest, or the participant reveals facts in written or oral statements during the proceeding before the officer that make the person’s financial interest apparent. All relevant facts known by the officer at the time of the proceeding should be considered.

The regulation creates three rebuttable presumptions. An officer is deemed to know of a participant’s potential financial interest when they are aware a participant has: an interest in real property within 500’ of the project; an economic interest in a business entity that may see a significant increase or decrease in customers as a result of the proceeding; or a business relationship with the applicant that may result in additional services provided to the applicant. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18438.7(a)(2).) The above notwithstanding, an officer does *not* know or have reason to know of a participant’s financial interest in a decision solely as a result of the participant identifying an economic interest located in the general vicinity of

a business entity or real property at issue in the proceeding. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18438.7(a)(4).)

- **Accepting, receiving, soliciting, and directing contributions.** An officer “accepts” or “receives” a contribution when the contribution is made to the officer’s own campaign or any committee controlled by the officer. An officer “solicits” or “directs” a contribution by requesting contributions to any other campaign or controlled committee, not just their own. Note that a “controlled committee” can include not just campaign committees but also ballot measure committees, legal defense funds, recall committees, and officeholder controlled committees. The regulation includes exceptions for fundraising requests through mass mailings or mass media, as well as speaking at public events. Also, an officer does not solicit or direct a contribution solely because the officer’s name is printed with other names on stationery or letterhead used to request contributions. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18438.6.)
- **Aggregating contributions.** All contributions made by a party or participant must be aggregated with contributions made by their agents during the prior 12 months or from the date the agent was hired as a paid employee, contractor, or consultant, whichever is shorter. For example, if Party A contributes \$75 in April 2023, and Party A’s agent contributes \$176 in June 2023, the recipient of the \$251 campaign contribution would be limited by the Levine Act until June 2024. The party or participant’s contributions must also be aggregated with contributions by individuals (other than an uncompensated officer of a non-profit organization), or entities required to be aggregated with the party, participant, or agent under Government Code § 82015.5. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18438.5.)
- **Disclosures.** An officer must disclose receipt of a disqualifying contribution on the record at the beginning of the public meeting involving the proceeding. If an official learns of a contribution *during* a proceeding, they must disclose the contribution on the record before participating further in the proceeding. (2 CCR § 18438.8.) The official may continue to participate in the proceeding if the official has known or should have known about the contribution and proceeding for fewer than 30 days, discloses the disqualifying contribution on the record of the public meeting, confirms the contribution will be returned within 30 days of when the official knew or should have known about the contribution, and the contribution is returned within that time. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, §§ 18438.7, 18438.8.)
- **Willful or knowing receipt of a contribution.** An officer who “willfully or knowingly received” a contribution from a party or participant with a financial interest may not participate in or influence the decision. Willful or knowing receipt includes when the officer has actual knowledge of the contribution, when the contribution is disclosed by the party or participant at the proceeding (as required by Government Code section 84308(e)), or when the officer is aware of other facts establishing reason to know of the contribution (such as being informed by another person a contribution has been made, a history of two or more prior donations over \$250 from the party or participant, the officer’s personal solicitation of a contribution from the party, etc.). However, an officer without actual knowledge of

the contribution from a party or participant does not have reason to know of the contribution based solely on the fact that the contribution was reported as required by law. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, §18438.7.)

- **Legally required participation.** Officials who would otherwise be disqualified from engaging in a proceeding can participate if their participation is legally required, in the same manner as when a conflict exists due to a financial interest. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18703.) Also, see the FPPC’s *Granda* informal advice letter addressing how legally required participation applies to strong mayors, discussed further below.

FPPC Letters. Since 1982, the FPPC has issued over 200 formal and informal advice letters related to the Levine Act. The database of letters on the FPPC website is an important starting point for research.⁵ Although the law has been expanded to cover local elected officials, the fundamental requirements and prohibitions have not changed. In addition, the FPPC has fielded many questions in 2023 from elected officials. Recent letters include the following:

- **Contracts are proceedings, regardless of value.** Contracts are considered entitlement for use proceedings for purposes of Section 84308 regardless of value. Small contracts, including purchase orders, are subject to Section 84308’s provisions. Charter school petitions, which are contracts, are subject to Section 84308. Labor contracts, such as collectively bargained project labor agreements, are expressly exempted from Section 84308. (FPPC *Valesquez* informal advice letter, No. I-23-065, May 9, 2023; see also Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 18348.2(a)(3)(B).)
- **Strong mayors and legally required participation.** The legally required participation exception likely applies to strong mayors exercising approval or veto powers. Examining *Affordable Hous. Alliance v. Feinstein* (1986) 179 Cal.App.3d 484 and its progeny, the *Granda* letter clarified that San Diego’s strong mayor may participate in a proceeding despite receiving a disqualifying contribution in the preceding 12 months because of his charter-granted veto and approval powers. However, the mayor may not solicit, receive, or direct contributions exceeding \$250 while a proceeding is pending or for a year after, and is required to disclose the contribution. (FFPC *Granda* informal advice letter, No. I-23-102, July 12, 2023.)
- **Applicability to candidates.** The FPPC applied Regulation 18438.1 to clarify that a candidate for elected office is not an “officer of the agency” subject to the restrictions of Section 84308 unless they have decisionmaking authority with respect to a proceeding in the *Titus* formal advice letter (No. A-23-103, published June 27, 2023).

Outstanding questions. While the FPPC’s amended regulations provide some clarity, ambiguities remain. For example, what is an “informal request” triggering a proceeding?

⁵ <https://www.fppc.ca.gov/advice/advice-opinion-search.html>

Does a right to appeal a lower level decision to City Council (e.g., from Planning Commission) make it “reasonably foreseeable” that the decision will come before the City Council? Would an individual who complains about a project’s impact on home values in a community with high rates of home ownership mean an officer “knows or has reason to know” that individual is a participant with a financial interest in a proceeding? If your agency encounters such questions, cities may benefit from a request for formal advice from the FPPC.

Senator Glazer, the author of SB 1439, also requested an opinion from the Attorney General addressing whether the disclosure and recusal provisions of SB 1439 apply to contributions made before January 1, 2023. As of the drafting of this paper the Attorney General has not issued an opinion. Since Senator Glazer’s request, the revised FPPC regulations and its formal *Kendrick* opinion both expressly addressed the question in the negative.

Legal challenge to SB 1439. The *Family Business Ass’n v. FPPC* (Sac. Superior Court Case #34-2023-00335169) challenge to SB 1439 on constitutional grounds was unsuccessful; the Sacramento Superior Court granted a motion for judgment on the pleadings rejecting all of the plaintiff’s arguments on May 25, 2023. Appeal was due by August 16, 2023, and no appeal is on the Court of Appeal’s or trial court’s docket as of late August when this paper is written.

Practice ideas.

- Include a field in staff report templates indicating whether Section 84308 applies (see City of Anaheim staff reports as an example).
- Include a reminder on meeting agendas about applicability of Section 84308 or add a standing agenda item for officers’ and participants’ disclosures.
- Require applicant to disclose contributions when they submit their applications – e.g., include a disclosure section on templates to list campaign contribution over \$250 to a decisionmaker in the prior twelve months.
- Include a provision in forms of contracts to alert contracting parties to this statute.

As agencies implement SB 1439, we encourage proactive training for officers to help them understand the expanded Levine Act. The Institute for Local Government recently held a webinar on the topic; the video presentation is available here: <https://www.ca-ilg.org/post/lunch-and-learn-californias-new-campaign-contribution-regulations-what-local-governments-need> .