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ON POLITICS

City selects team to lobby in Austin

By **KRISTEN MACK**

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Amid much talk about the usefulness (or lack thereof) of lobbyists, the city decided to hire the team it has worked with for the past two legislative sessions, brothers Rob and Gordon Johnson.

They and 11 subcontractors will be paid \$520,000 for work during the session and another \$75,000 for work next year representing the city before state agencies.

This year's team includes Walter Fisher, who served as Texas Senate parliamentarian under four lieutenant governors and for 10 years as director of legislative services for the Texas Municipal League. His ex-wife is

Nancy Fisher, chief of staff for House Speaker Tom Craddick.

Nancy Fisher's sister, Nora Del Bosque, also is on the lobbying team.

Randy Erben, an official in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under former President Bush, is among Republicans on the bipartisan team.

Democrats include Anthony Haley, former vice president for university relations at Texas Southern University, who served as chief of staff for Houston Democratic Sen.

Rodney Ellis and Rep. Garnet Coleman.

In another nod to Democrats, the city hired Carl Richie, an attorney who was a legislative staffer for Ellis and Gov. Ann Richards.

Some of the lobbyists have worked on the city's team before.

They include Marta Greytok, former chair of the state Public Utility Commission, and Don McFarlin, former legislative affairs executive with SBC Communications.

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"It's a good team and should ably represent the city in Austin," said Robert Miller, a partner at Locke, Liddell & Sapp, who has worked six legislative sessions and represents the Houston police, fire and municipal pension systems among others. Mayor Bill White's administration says it saved money, since lobbying teams in the past have had as many as 18 members and cost \$1 million. The 2003 contract was for \$840,000.

Whether it's a bargain, though, will depend upon the team's effectiveness in pushing the mayor's agenda, and that could be trying.

Among the issues White wants to push for in Austin are closing after-hours clubs and giving the city the first right of refusal on foreclosed properties to develop more affordable housing.

People in the Capitol say that Austin will be a challenging environment for the mayor. "I don't believe he has the long-standing relationships in Austin and relationships are a big part of success in Austin. But I would never say that he can't overcome them," Miller said.

"In Houston he is operating from his power base, the business CEO community. And he can be very persuasive one-on-one."

But Miller pointed out White will have to use those persuasive skills on 183 legislators instead of 14 City Council members.

The city can expect strong opposition, for example, from State Rep. Gary Elkins of Houston, who opposes an ordinance council passed in December to nab red-light runners with cameras.

Elkins, a Republican who led opposition to camera enforcement of red lights in the 2003 Legislature, already has filed a bill to kill the ordinance, and at least two local Democratic representatives have indicated they also oppose the camera enforcement. There also is talk that Republican legislators will make it tough on White because they view him as a future statewide Democratic candidate.

White has selected a competent team that will give him good advice and provide him access to legislators, Miller said, but it will ultimately be up the mayor to convince the Legislature to enact his programs.

kristen.mack@chron.com