

When Grants Aren't Enough, Museum Lobbyist Goes Fishing

BY LISA LERER

Lobbyists generally don't spend much time protecting members of Congress from 40-pound flying fish. But for Anne Metcalf, a veteran lobbyist for zoos, shielding legislators from airborne fish is precisely what she'll be doing in July when she distributes hard hats to a junket of congressmen sailing down the Missouri River.

The fish, known as Asian carp, are like a Monty Python skit come to life. Originally imported from Asia, the fast-breeding fish are a major danger for boaters. When startled, they jump 10 feet out of the water, often beaming boaters on their way back down. The carp eat up to 40 percent of their own body weight in plankton each day, wreaking havoc on the ecosystem.

Where conservationists saw a menace, the St. Louis Zoo saw lunch. The zoo developed a plan to chop the fish into carp cakes, a perfect snack for its hundreds of fish-eating zoo animals.

The nutrition department needed funding for the project, so the zoo called Metcalf, its Washington lobbyist.

The 43-year-old pioneered the museum earmark business, convincing an increasing number of members to attach special federal funding for her clients onto larger bills. Today, several of the biggest lobbying shops in town include museum earmarks as part of their services. Metcalf's firm, Metcalf Federal Relations, lobbies exclusively for nonprofit cultural institutions in Congress and federal agencies.

"I was one of a handful of firms representing museums and zoos," she said. "Now there are a ton of them. Sometimes it feels like I contributed to the creation of a monster."

She's not the only one worrying about earmarks. Government watchdog groups disparage the funds as quintessential government pork. "Whether it's a museum, theater or local invention center, these are all local entities that should be funded locally," says Tom Schatz, president of Citizens Against Government Waste.

Despite increased competition and criticism, Metcalf is prospering with a hand-picked stable of elite museum and zoo clients. Metcalf's client list includes the Field Museum in Chicago, the Philadelphia Zoo and the Brooklyn Museum. These institutions pay Metcalf to get them not only earmarks but also lucrative federal grants and appointments on presidential commissions.

Museums and zoos do more than just exhibit treasures. They run educational programs, bring in traveling scholars and do important research and conservation projects worldwide. All these duties cost money that isn't always available at the state and local level. Museums depend on federal funds for a quarter of their operating income, according to the American Association of Museums. To help get those funds, museums have spent \$45.5 million on federal lobbying over the past nine years, reports the Center for Responsive Politics.

Metcalf has made \$2.9 million from museum work since 1998, according to the



■ Metcalf, with Szczesny, prefers to keep her operation small and intimate.

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CRP. That makes her five-person firm the second most lucrative lobbying shop that works on behalf of cultural institutions. Cassidy & Associates, a lobbying firm with almost 10 times as many employees, made \$3.8 million off museum work over the same period.

Her business grew up next to cultural earmarks. She opened her own shop in 1998 and picked up the Field Museum as her first client. The natural history museum wanted money for a free trolley to carry visitors to the museum's campus. Metcalf got a \$4.25 million earmark attached to the 1998 transportation bill. Six years later, she got one of the largest earmarks into the 2005 transportation bill: \$12.5 million for the Children's Museum of Indianapolis.

"She truly gets what's important to us," said Debra Moskovits, the Field's senior vice president of environment, culture and conservation. "She understands what our strengths are and what we can offer and recognizes where in U.S. policy there is a really good connection."

Metcalf said she is not interested in expanding her empire beyond cultural institutions. She's turned down buyout and merger offers from larger firms. "We're very tailored and hands-on," she said. "I like the intimacy."

The firm operates out of a bright, homey carriage house in Old Town Alexandria, just blocks from her home on Prince Street. Alex, a large but surprisingly docile Rottweiler, roams in and out alongside Metcalf's two children. "We're not a Goliath, but we do have a Rottweiler," quipped Barry Szczesny, a lawyer who came to Metcalf from the American Association of Museums.

Metcalf, a native of McLean, Va., start-

ed her career as a staffer for the late Sen. John Heinz III (R-Pa.). From there, she spent a year at Hill and Knowlton and then moved to the Environmental Protection Agency; she worked there for seven years. In 1997, Metcalf took a job at Lewis-Burke Associates, a lobbying firm that specializes in universities and other research institutions. Soon after, she spun off her own shop.

Lobbying for museums is generally feel-good work. "You walk into the door with a head start as opposed to being, say, a tobacco lobbyist," said Szczesny. Hill staffers have good memories of childhood visits, which makes them more receptive to the message.

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Metcalf's work doesn't give everyone the warm fuzzies. Over the past year and a half, there's been a backlash against museum earmarks. The funds dropped from \$91 million in 2005 to about \$76 million in 2006, according to the American Association of Museums.

Last year, Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) held a hearing on museum earmarks. His staff reviewed appropriations bill conference reports from 2001 to 2006 and found more than 860 earmarks totaling \$567 million; about 65 percent of the projects and money went to the home states of members of the appropriations committees. Earmarks let museums avoid the

competitive application and accountability measures necessary to get a grant from a government agency, the senator said.

Instead of focusing on earmarks, Metcalf is increasingly seeking out more contracts and grants. The Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities all slightly increased the number and amount of federal grants for museums from 2005 to 2006, reported the museum association. "Years ago it was not so difficult to say that a client could get seven figures for something," Metcalf explained. "Now I don't say that as much anymore."

As business got tougher, Metcalf got creative. When the International Species Information System wanted funding for new software, Metcalf went to the Centers for Disease Control and the Department of Homeland Security. The ISIS connects zoo databases so they can share information, including animal death records; any animal that dies in a zoo, be it an official part of the collection or an errant squirrel, gets an autopsy. Since many particularly virulent diseases like West Nile or SARS start in animals, Metcalf sold the CDC on zoos as an early warning system. She hopes to do the same at Homeland Security, which is looking for help to expand its bio-surveillance capacity.

Her firm also joins coalitions that support nonprofit-friendly legislation, such as low-interest loans for cultural institutions and special postal rates. When necessary, Metcalf solicits other partners in the fight, getting teachers, chambers of commerce and tourism agencies to lobby on behalf of the museum.

Sometimes, it even takes a few flying fish.