

The Atlanta Way

Examining Pay-to-Play

Acknowledgements

Established in 2000, the Common Cause Education Fund is the research and public education affiliate of Common Cause, founded by John Gardner in 1970, and one of the country's most effective organizations working to reduce the influence of special-interest money in politics, breaking down barriers to participation, ensuring transparency in government, and protecting the free flow of information. We work to create an open, honest, and accountable government that serves the public interest; promote equal rights, opportunity, and representation for all; and empower all people to make their voices heard in the political process.

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, the city of Atlanta has grappled with institutionalized corruption. Despite its aspirations to be recognized as an international city, a cultural hub for business and people in the South, and a suitable destination for conventioners and tourists, the patterns of pay-to-play are strikingly clear in Atlanta. It is well known that businesses can establish relationships with city council members through donations and contributions of even a couple hundred dollars. This practice is often referred to as “the Atlanta way” of doing business.

“The Atlanta way” undermines democracy, as politicians often neglect the needs of everyday constituents to cater to the interests of wealthy donors and big industries.

“The Atlanta way” undermines democracy, as elected officials often neglect the needs of everyday constituents to cater to the interests of wealthy donors and big industries. These industries see the city council as the head of a major bureaucracy, with lucrative potential. This bureaucracy encompasses departments with budgets reaching hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of employees. Through campaign contributions and other support, powerful business interests gain access to council members to influence the decision-making on major contracts and city developments. Incumbent council members, armed with extensive donor databases, often possess the financial clout to overpower any challengers, perpetuating a cycle of influence and corruption.

The Atlanta way has been most evident in the awarding of city contracts to close associates, family members, and political contributors of municipal government officials. This report highlights some of the most egregious examples of pay-to-play in Atlanta’s history, including more than \$1 million in [bribes](#) paid to Atlanta elected officials in the 1990s. Bribes came from contractors vying



for lucrative restaurant and shop concessions inside the Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

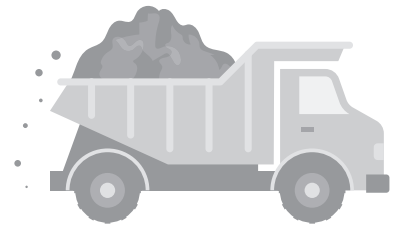
In continuation of last year's report [The Atlanta Way: Cop City and Pay-to-Play](#), we expanded our research to all current Atlanta City Council members and their campaign contributions. The research revealed a consistent appearance of pay-to-play with several conflicts of interest arising from contributions made by special interests to council members.

Building upon the previous report's findings regarding the influence of campaign contributions on policy decisions, this investigation delves deeper into the campaign finance records and legislative actions of all current Atlanta City Council members and the mayor. Our goal is to highlight corporate money's harmful pay-to-play dynamics in Atlanta and their impact on the building of the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, often called 'Cop City'. In this report, we also shine a light on the millions of dollars in Atlanta contracts that are given to top campaign contributors.

Pay-to-play has unfortunately been the rule and not the exception in Atlanta.

THE DIRTY HISTORY OF PAY TO PLAY IN ATLANTA

The phenomenon of pay-to-play politics in Atlanta is not new. Past instances of corruption surrounding airport-related contracts, including bribery scandals involving city officials, underscore the systemic issues plaguing the city's governance. Despite efforts to curb such practices, campaign contributions continue to exert undue influence on decision-making processes. Here are just a few of the scandals and insider dealings brought to light over the last three decades:



- **Elected officials and vendors found guilty of federal bribery charges, 1993/1994.** A federal court jury convicted Ira Jackson, a former airport commissioner and councilman influential in overseeing the airport, on 83 counts of mail fraud, 43 counts of accepting bribes and 4 counts of tax evasion. The violations were part of a scheme in which Jackson illegally received more than \$1 million, in addition to bribes, from an airport business to provide favorable treatment to airport businesses he regulated. Also convicted of 83 mail fraud charges and 1 conspiracy count was Dan Paradies, who operated gift shops at Hartsfield-Jackson airport and 74 other airports around the country. The case centered on a program for encouraging minority-owned businesses at the airport. While that program had received praise for years, the charges in this case seemed to show the program as having been corrupted into a scheme to benefit businessmen and political leaders.
- **Dirt-hauling contract, Ronnie Thornton, 1997-2001.** In 2001, the airport was at the center of a [controversy](#) over the proposed \$350 million contract to build Hartsfield's fifth runway. C.R. "Ronnie" Thornton, a Clayton County businessman, admitted in federal court on Oct. 18,

2001 that he improperly raised \$130,000 for campaign contributions. Thornton, a one-time city contractor and former lawyer, testified that then-Mayor Bill Campbell knew about illegal contributions to his 1997 campaign. Thornton testified about his efforts to win favor from Campbell for his plan to sell fill dirt to then-Hartsfield Airport for its fifth runway.

- **Indoor advertising contract, Billy Corey, July 2010.** A federal jury awarded \$17.5 million in damages to Atlanta businessman Billy Corey, who claimed that the City of Atlanta and Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport illegally directed a lucrative indoor advertising contract to a politically connected competitor. Corey alleged that the city [violated his rights](#) and its own bidding rules by awarding the contract to Clear Channel and its minority partner, Barbara Fouch. Federal District Judge Charles Pannell Jr. dismissed an appeal by Atlanta officials, citing a “decades-long pattern” by the city to “shut out outsiders” from winning contracts at the airport. The judge noted an “evil motive” in the city’s three decades of cronyism.

“The airport and the concessions contracts have been a fatted cow for which a lot of politicians have wanted a cut for a long time. The bidding process at the airport in many instances has been suspect if not outright corrupt.”

— EMMET BONDURANT
Principal, Bondurant, Mixson & Elmore Law, and
Former chair of Common Cause Georgia

- **Airport shuttle contract, Darrell Anderson, 2010-present.** Anderson, with personal ties to former Mayor Kasim Reed and his father June, was awarded control over the airport’s shuttle business in 2010 after paying \$32,000 to June Reed’s recycling company, Capital Plastic Recyclers. Months after a second check of \$35,000 was written that same year, a \$6.6 million contract was awarded to Anderson. Despite being required to disclose conflicts of interest according to the contract terms, none were reported. At the time, Common Cause Georgia [publicly shed light](#) on this clear violation. Nevertheless, Anderson’s company, A National Limousine, has continued to receive contracts with the city, with \$42.98 million awarded since 2016.

CORPORATE MONEY INFLUENCE IN ATLANTA

Cop City

Our first report, *The Atlanta Way: Cop City and Pay-to-Play* exposed how play-to-play is still alive and well in Atlanta and seen in the building of the controversial Atlanta Public Safety Training Center dubbed, “Cop City.” The \$110 million dollar training facility being built by the powerful police lobby, the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) and the Atlanta City Council, will be a training site for the Atlanta Police Department, Atlanta Fire Rescue, the city’s 911 call center and K-9 units. The 85-acre site would also be [home](#) to a shooting range and a “mock city” for training scenarios, firing ranges, and other specialized training areas.

After first being proposed by the Atlanta Police Foundation in 2017, in September 2021, the Atlanta City Council approved a lease agreement for the 85-acre site in the South River Forest area. The chosen site is part of a forested area in DeKalb County, which has led to significant opposition from environmentalists and community activists. Opponents argue that the project will destroy valuable green space and contribute to environmental degradation. Additionally, many local residents and activists have [voiced concerns](#) about the potential for increased police militarization and the impact on surrounding communities.

Since the project's approval, there have been numerous protests and demonstrations against the construction of Cop City. Activists have organized rallies, marches, and sit-ins, and some have even occupied the forested area to prevent construction. These protests have led to clashes with law enforcement and the death of protestor and climate activist Manuel Paez Terán, who went by "Tortuguita," on January 18, 2023.

The project has also been the subject of various legal challenges and political debates. Some local officials and community leaders have called for the project to be reconsidered or relocated, while supporters argue that the facility is necessary for improving public safety and law enforcement training and is not a burden on Atlanta's green spaces since the acreage is not currently being utilized.

As of now, construction is ongoing amid continued protests and opposition. The debate over Cop City remains a contentious issue in Atlanta, highlighting broader national discussions about policing, environmental justice, and community relations.

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The controversy over Cop City also reflects broader national discussions about policing, community investment, and environmental justice. It underscores the tensions between efforts to reform and improve public safety and the impacts on local communities and environments.

The development of Cop City remains a focal point of activism and debate in Atlanta, highlighting the complexities of balancing public safety needs with community and environmental concerns.

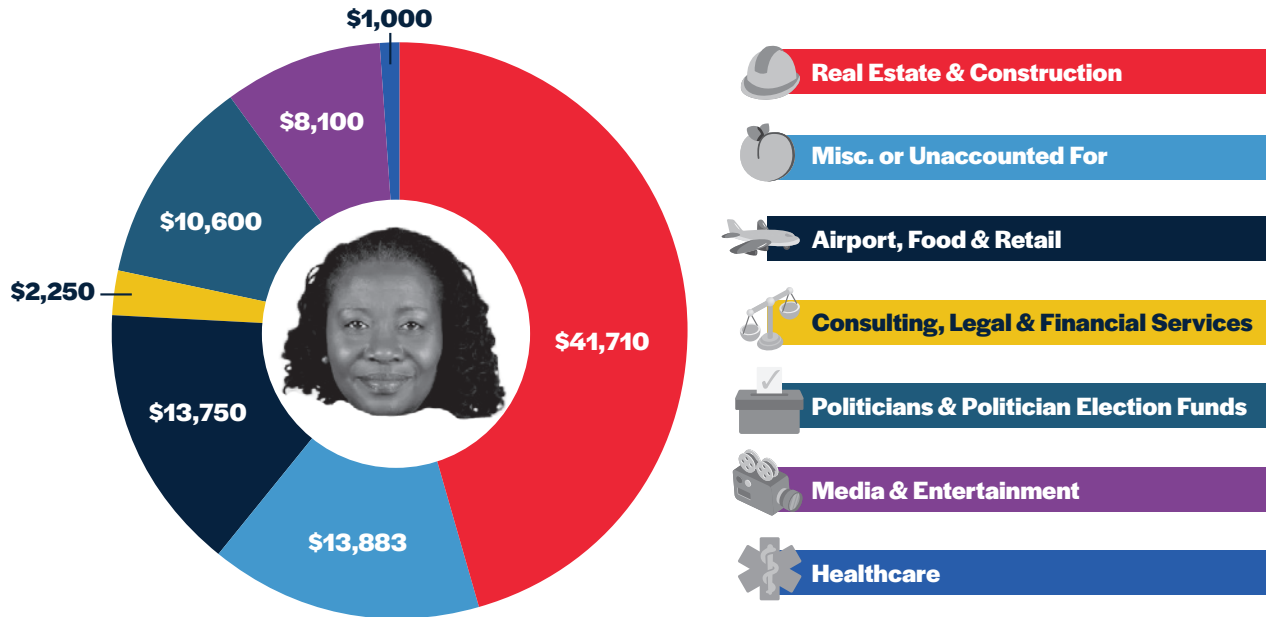
Cop City & Contractor Pay-to-Play

Despite a lack of public support, the Atlanta City Council voted 11-4 to lease land in DeKalb County for the construction of the police training facility. This decision, which affects an unincorporated neighborhood whose residents cannot participate in Atlanta's elections, was made following 17 hours of public comments from hundreds of individuals, including local researchers. Approximately 70% of commenters opposed the lease and the allocation of \$30 million in city funds for the project.

In a well-functioning democracy, a city council would be expected to heed such significant public dissent. However, the Council approved the funding and the lease despite strong opposition.

Our research found clear patterns of corporate money influence in Atlanta's city council.

Joyce Sheperd's campaign finance donations



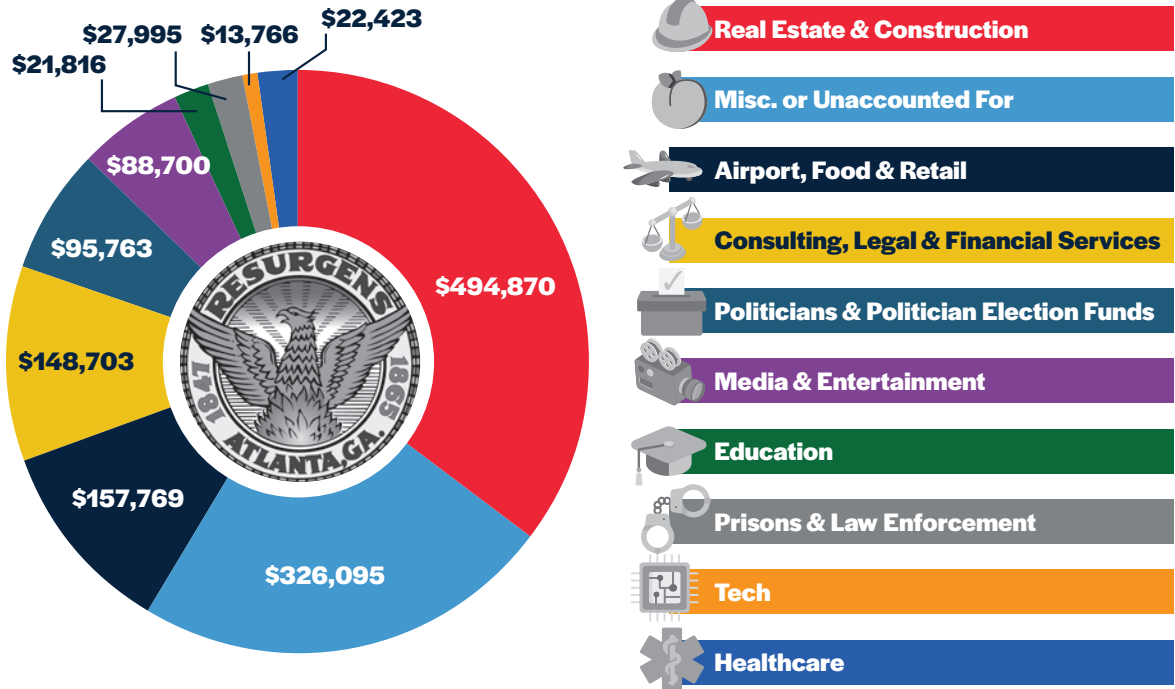
Former Council Member Joyce Sheperd's 2021 campaign received more than 50% of her donations of over \$250 from real estate and construction companies. Sheperd then went on to introduce legislation to lease land to build "Cop City." Sheperd served as the District 12 city council member from 2004 to 2022.

The resulting passage of the expansive training center or "Cop City" necessitated more high-revenue contracts with various real estate and construction companies, many secured through pay-to-play practices.

Similar to our previous analysis of former Council member Joyce Sheperd, we uncovered patterns indicating a reciprocal relationship between campaign donors and several council members with the power to decide on major initiatives potentially benefitting their bottom line. Campaign finance data reveals a consistent flow of contributions from industries such as real estate, construction, food/retail, and other business sectors seeking contracts or favorable policies from the city.

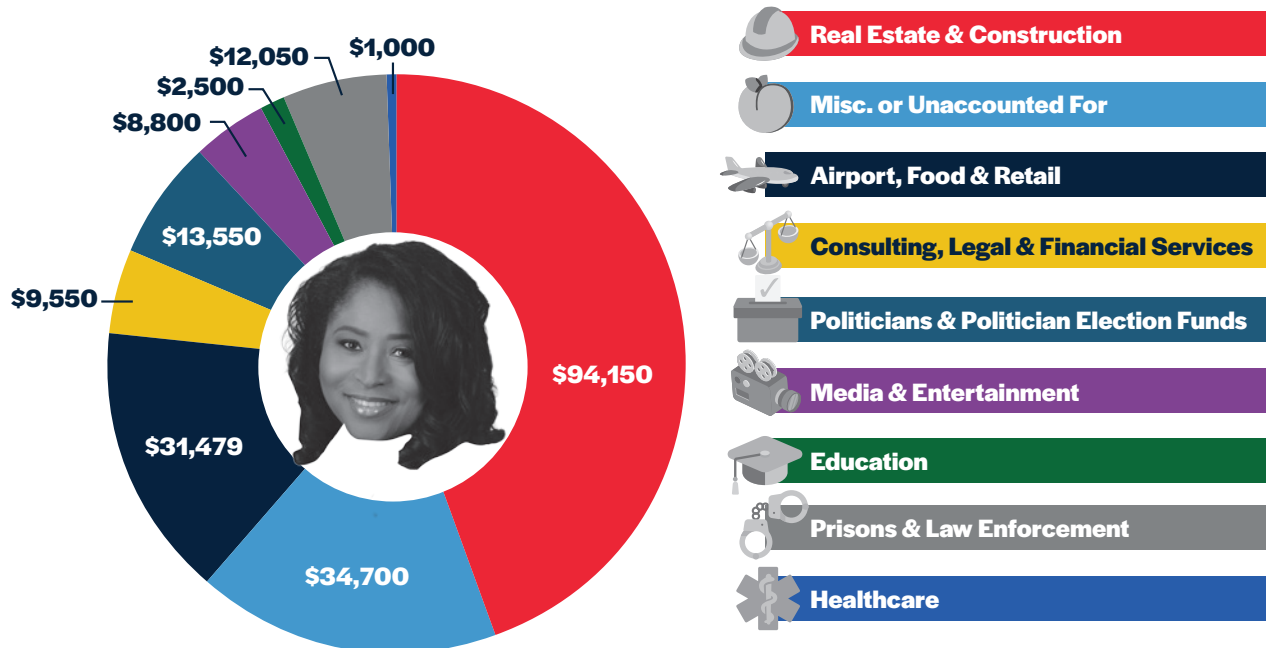
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Campaign finance donations for all current ATL city council members, excluding Joyce Sheperd



Our research found that real estate and construction companies donated the largest contributions to the 2021 –2025 Atlanta City Council members during the campaign period. These real estate and construction companies represent the largest industry donors at 35% totaling more than \$510K. Many of these businesses gained city contracts or experienced increased revenue from their pre-existing contracts after their contributions. The data was collected through the review of city council member’s 2021 campaign disclosure documents available through [The City of Atlanta’s Easy Campaign Finance Portal](#).











Andrea Boone’s campaign finance donations



Andrea Boone – District 10’s representative – received the most contributions over \$250 from real estate and construction companies than all other current city council members. 44% of all her donations over \$250 came from this industry and coincided with her YES vote on the cop city legislation. Boone is in her second term as a member of the Atlanta City Council and in her role, she supported the city council and mayor’s goals to [expand](#) the Atlanta Police Department by hiring 2,000 new officers.

Our research also found that the city council members who voted YES on the Cop City vote received most of their donations from real estate companies, followed by the airport, food, and retail industry. Below you can view the donations above \$250 for each council member, your district and see the highlighted city council members that approved Cop City construction.

All current council members (including Joyce Sheperd’s) campaign finance donations

City Council Member	 Real Estate & Construction	 Misc or Unaccounted For	 Airport, Food & Retail	 Consulting, Legal & Financial Services	 Politicians & Politicians Election Funds	 Media/ Entertainment	 Education	 Prisons and Law Enforcement	 Healthcare	 Tech	Amount
Byron Amos	\$12,850.00	\$1,550.00	\$6,000.00	\$2,400.00	\$2,000.00	\$4,050.00	\$550.00	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$29,400.00
Liliana Bahktiari	\$1,582.48	\$6,358.42	\$331.90	\$1,671.72	\$2,938.32	\$103.45	\$1,408.32	\$766.32	\$-	\$660.35	\$15,921.28
Michael Bond	\$10,850.00	\$3,750.00	\$1,000.00	\$3,250.00	\$3,500.00	\$1,500.00	\$500.00	\$250.00	\$-	\$2,250.00	\$29,900
Andrea Boone	\$91,950.00	\$34,700.00	\$30,979.11	\$9,550.00	\$13,550.00	\$8,800.00	\$2,500.00	\$12,050.00	\$1,000.00	\$-	\$205,079.11
Jason Dozier	\$14,458.32	\$6,658.32	\$3,866.32	\$5,290.90	\$11,774.96	\$2,008.00	\$3,816.32	\$2,750.00	\$2,516.64	\$2,027.19	\$55,166.97
Amir Farokhi	\$6,500.00	\$1,800.00	\$1,500.00	\$-	\$6,500.00	\$500.00	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$16,800.00
Dustin Hills	\$47,900.00	\$18,700.00	\$13,400.00	\$8,100.00	\$7,800.00	\$4,550.00	\$-	\$3,800.00	\$-	\$-	\$104,250.00
Antonio Lewis	\$250.00	\$3,035.00	\$750.00	\$1,250.00	\$2,250.00	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$7,535.00
Mary Norwood	\$75,975.00	\$145,305.00	\$33,550.00	\$30,350.00	\$-	\$15,000.00	\$-	\$-	\$8,850.00	\$-	\$309,030.00
Marci Overstreet	\$40,890.00	\$20,465.00	\$18,479.00	\$17,025.00	\$5,350.00	\$5,205.00	\$1,905.00	\$1,555.00	\$4,805.00	\$505.00	\$116,184.00
Joyce Shepherd*	\$41,710.52	\$13,883.17	\$13,750.00	\$2,250.00	\$10,600.00	\$8,100.00	\$-	\$-	\$1,000.00	\$-	\$91,293.69
Doug Shipman	\$41,126.71	\$7,935.19	\$10,263.50	\$16,616.10	\$3,750.00	\$22,132.80	\$2,637.18	\$4,324.31	\$3,002.09	\$5,323.72	\$114,109.51
Howard Shook	\$18,200.00	\$-	\$2,750.00	\$250.00	\$550.00	\$-	\$3,000.00	\$1,500.00	\$-	\$-	\$26,250.00
Alex Wan	\$15,201.00	\$11,150.00	4500	\$9,300.00	\$3,050.00	\$4,000.00	\$1,250.00	\$750.00	\$800.00	\$2,250.00	\$55,510.00
Matt Westmoreland	\$45,250.00	\$41,055.00	\$10,750.00	\$29,200.00	\$18,500.00	\$3,750.00	\$4,500.00	\$-	\$1,250.00	\$1,250.00	\$154,255.00
Jason Winston	\$36,927.00	\$17,900.00	\$9,400.00	\$20,500.00	\$4,100.00	\$13,001.00	\$1,000.00	\$1,000.00	\$-	\$1,750.00	\$114,103.00
Totals:	\$510,071.03	\$337,245.10	\$162,269.83	\$158,003.72	\$98,813.28	\$92,700.25	\$23,066.82	\$28,745.63	\$23,223.73	\$16,016.26	\$1,450,155.65
	35%	23%	11%	11%	7%	6%	2%	2%	2%	1%	

Note: Names highlighted in yellow voted YES on copy city legislation. Starred members are no longer in office.

Further analysis of our data found that city council members who voted YES on the Cop City vote all received large amounts of donations from real estate and construction companies. These city council members – Michael Julian Bond, Bryon Amos, Andrea Boone, Matt Westmoreland, Amir Farokhi, Howard Shook, Joyce Sheperd, Dustin Hills, Marci Collier Overstreet, Mary Norwood, Alan Wan and Dustin Hillis – all voted in favor of the training center and received over 35% of their donations over \$250 from real estate and construction companies.

Our research also accounts for 24% of what we labeled as “miscellaneous or unaccounted-for donations.” These contributions are made mostly by individuals who work in a variety of sectors, including self-employment and those who are retired. Most of the donations range between \$250 to \$1,000. While the gifts do not fit into the named categories explored in this research, a number of the donations are from LLCs and other business entities that do not have a digital footprint, which creates a significant barrier for transparency in the donation process and undermines the accountability process necessary for our democracy.

Cop City & Corporate Pay-to-Play

The construction of Cop City has required millions in funding for its proposed opening. About 80 percent of that funding has come from private donations to the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF). We saw the same [private companies](#), board members of the APF, and sponsors donating to the city council in 2021 when the Cop City legislation was introduced. Some major corporate sponsors — like Bank of America, Truist, AT&T, and UPS— have employees who are involved with the Atlanta Police Foundation and serve on the APF Board of Trustees. Our investigation into city council contributions, supplemented with research by the American Friends Service Committee’s reporting on Cop City funders, donors and contractors, revealed connections between the following businesses and the construction of Cop City:



Delta Air Lines is reported to have [donated](#) at least \$500,000 to the Atlanta Police Foundation; they are a repeated [corporate sponsor](#) for APF events; and their Managing Director of Community Engagement Tad Hutcheson [serves on the APF Board of Trustees](#). Our research found that Delta Air Lines workers and employees contributed over \$6,400 to city council members during the 2021 election cycle, specifically Jason Winston, Marci Overstreet and Doug Shipman. These council members, except Council President Doug Shipman who was not in office yet, all voted in support for Cop City during the 2021 vote.



Cox Enterprises (Cox Communications, Cox Automotives) employees and chairman donated over \$5,800 in the 2021 election cycle to city council member Mary Norwood who voted in support of the Cop City construction vote and a total of \$16,050 in donations to city council members and Mayor Dickens. The following year, Cox solidified their [support](#) for Cop City with a \$10 million donation to the Atlanta Police Foundation. It is also [reported](#) that the company’s CEO Alex Taylor spearheads the APF Cop City fundraising campaign. It is unclear what responsibilities this position holds but so far, they are leading the initiative through large donations directly to the APF, city council members and calculated editorial pieces in support of Cop City in their major daily newspaper The Atlanta-Journal Constitution.



Truist (formerly SunTrust) is a recurring sponsor and donor to the APF with a most recent donation of [\\$3 million](#) to the police foundation in 2019. Truist employees and affiliates donated over \$3,100 in 2021 to city council members Dustin Hills and Jason Winston during their 2021 election year, and \$3,750 for Mayor Dickens’ 2021 campaign. Additionally, Becker O’Shaughnessy,

Atlanta Vice President of Truist, is on the Atlanta Police Foundation's Young Executives Board. Prior to 2019, there was already a deep history between Truist and prisons throughout the U.S. through their financing of CoreCivic and GEO Group's [private prisons and immigrant detention centers](#).



Bank of America is another donor and sponsor of the APF with their President and Co-Head of Merrill Wealth Management Eric Schimpf serving as a board member on the APF Board of Trustees. In our research, Bank of America and Merrill Lynch employees donated \$5,050 in 2021 to city council President Doug Shipman, Matt Westmoreland, Alex Wan, Mary Norwood, and \$5,000 alone to Mayor Dickens. Bank of America has a strong connection to the Atlanta Police foundation with over \$300,000 in donations and previous funding of private prisons and immigrant detention companies like CoreCivic and Geo Group.



Norfolk Southern Corporation employees donated about \$2,250 in 2021 to Dustin Hills, Antonio Lewis, Doug Shipman, and Amir Farokhi in their 2021 election year. In the following year, after Atlanta city council members' introduction and approval of Cop City construction, Norfolk Southern Corporation also [donated](#) \$100,000 to the Atlanta Police Foundation.



Coca Cola Company employees contributed over \$3,320 in the 2021 election cycle to city council members Jason Winston, Marci Overstreet, and Doug Shipman in 2021. Additionally, they have donated \$2,500 to Andre Dicken's campaign. The following year, Coca Cola also [donated \\$1 million](#) to the APF.

Contracted Donors

Among the many contributions that Atlanta city council members received during the 2021 election year, almost 30 businesses had active contracts with the city or received a contract in 2022 after their donations. In fact, over 15% of all campaign contributions to council members in 2021 came from current or former city contractors. Several of the businesses listed in our report experienced more business from the City after their 2021 contributions and after the passage of the Cop City construction. New vendors included Regions Bank, who donated \$4,650 to city council member Jason Winston and received a \$2.8 million contract reported in 2021. Similarly, Lexicon Strategies contributed \$6,050 during the election year and received a contract the same year. Notable examples of businesses that donated thousands to the city council members and received favorable contracts or land use decisions include:



Brock Built Homes, an Atlanta-based real estate developer, focused particularly on Atlanta's west side, home to Beltline Park. In 2021, the company contributed \$58,700 to city council members and Mayor Dickens' campaign. That same year, the City of Atlanta authorized an ordinance to initiate a property swap with Brock Built LLC, enabling the expansion of the [West Highlands neighborhood project](#).

Mayor Andre Dickens received nearly 30% of his donations of over \$250 from consulting firms and the tech industry during his 2021 mayoral campaign. Mayor Dickens' relationships with his donors often involve lucrative, long-standing contracts that suggest a pay-to-play dynamic, potentially compromising equal access to city contracts. For instance, Cox Enterprises, a long-time contractor for the city of Atlanta, made 21 donations, amounting in over \$14,500, to the Mayor during the 2021 election cycle. In 2022, Dickens [appointed](#) Donald Beamer, Jr., a former senior manager at Cox, as the City's first-ever Senior Tech Advisor.

These patterns of donations raise concerns about conflicts of interest and the unregulated impact on Atlanta residents which prioritizes corporate and private interests over community interests. Additionally, pay-to-play makes it difficult for new candidates to compete, win, and change the status quo because of incumbents' strong fundraising advantage. The continuation of pay-to-play encourages city council members to build relationships with donors that support their interests in city contracts and weakens our democracy by diluting constituents' voices for profit. This is evident in our data that reveals concerning accounts of large donations (\$250+) from companies and individuals who would benefit from the construction and implementation of Cop City in addition to other large city projects. Our data on the city council members is separated into various industries and depicts a clear pattern of pay-to-play with many of the repeat contributors holding substantial contracts with the city of Atlanta.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

An open and accountable government allows voters to participate in and understand the decision-making process that impacts people and spends government funds. The City of Atlanta's commitment to transparent procurement processes means keeping the public informed on how contracts are awarded so that people trust that elected officials are acting in their best interests. Voters deserve clarity and accountability around government spending just as much as businesses deserve more competitive, fair, and effective procurement opportunities. We ask that the City of Atlanta council members pledge to support the end of pay to play politics in Atlanta.

1. End contributions from entities doing or seeking business with the city of Atlanta

The city of Atlanta should limit the quid-pro-quo from special interests, such as those that are responsible for mass incarceration funding or other powerful lobbies with seemingly wealthy special interests. If such restrictions were implemented, we could see a reduction in the number of political contributions from self-interested individuals and entities and a reduction in lucrative government contracts handed to political donors.

The City of Atlanta should amend the Procurement and Real Estate Code to:

- Ban donations of over \$250 from persons or corporations seeking contracts with the City of Atlanta
- Ban persons or corporations awarded a contract by the City of Atlanta from making donations to candidates for Atlanta City Council

- Require the disqualification of any bid or proposal submitted in violation of the ban
- Terminate any contract with a person or corporation who makes donations to candidates for Atlanta City Council during the term of their contract

2. Amplify the voices of more everyday Americans, by changing how we pay for political campaigns

Citizen-funded elections amplify the voices of everyday Americans over wealthy special interests by boosting the role of small-dollar donors in our elections. Cities across the US have adopted such programs, which fall into two categories. In a matching funds program, candidates raise small-dollar contributions and receive a matched amount from the government. In a democracy dollars program, residents of a jurisdiction receive vouchers worth a specified amount (e.g., \$100), which they may distribute to candidates of their choice. All of these programs, regardless of mechanics, boost the role of regular residents and small donors over wealthy special interests.

This recommendation is particularly key because overall across America, our elected leaders are raising more money from a smaller share of the population. This leads our elected leaders down a dangerous path. They are listening more to a handful of deep-pocketed donors and big-money interests than that of everyday Americans. If we want to ensure that everyone has a meaningful voice in politics and that policies are more responsive to public needs and less influenced by wealthy donors, we need to put citizen-funded election programs at the center.

METHODOLOGY

All 2021 campaign finance contribution data was retrieved from the [City of Atlanta Campaign Finance Portal](#). Contributions were categorized as follows:

- Real Estate & Construction
- Airport, Food, & Retail
- Consulting, Legal, & Financial Services
- Politicians & Politicians' Election Funds
- Media & Entertainment
- Prisons & Law Enforcement
- Education
- Technology
- Healthcare
- Miscellaneous or Unaccounted For

Contributions of less than \$250 were removed from the final tally and analysis. While all contributions may create possible conflicts, our focus is directed toward larger donations that may give rise to “the Atlanta way” of doing business.

All contributions were categorized according to each contributor’s listed business or employer.

Resources

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