

11 of 100 DOCUMENTS

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SECOND EDITION**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. 16A**LENGTH:** 668 words**HEADLINE:** Lobbyists party for the party Businesses pull out all the stops to entertain delegates in Boston**BYLINE:** WAYNE SLATER, Senior Political Writer**DATELINE:** BOSTON**BODY:**

BOSTON – On the banks of Boston Harbor, there was the sound of mariachi music.

A trio of festively clad musicians sang in Spanish as delegates from Texas mingled on the lawn overlooking the bay where a fireboat sent huge sprays of water in welcome.

"Have all the drinks you want," said ConocoPhillips lobbyist Don Duncan, pointing to a bar arranged like a bright yellow hacienda here in the heart of Yankee country.

The Tex-Mex fare was something of a surprise for Rene Oliveira, a state representative from Brownsville.

"I was looking for lobster and scrod," he said.

No problem. Not this week – and not during the movable feast of delegation parties and lobbyist soirees. There's plenty of lobster to go around.

While the Democrats' official business is on the floor of the FleetCenter, the skyboxes ringing the arena and trendy hot spots all over town are home to high-dollar entertaining by corporations, law firms and lobbyists.

There are hundreds of lunches, cruises, golf games, special tours, four-star dinners and swanky receptions – all bankrolled by business interests looking for a little quality time with government decision makers.

"You're talking about access here," said Larry Noble, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonprofit group that tracks money in politics. "It allows the company officials to cozy up to office holders and is a great way to build relationships."

The party sponsors rejected suggestions that they are buying influence, saying they are just being good corporate citizens.

Republicans will get the same treatment at their convention in New York.

The American Gas Association threw a bash for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus featuring Los Lobos and a reception for Sen. Max Baucus of Montana at a Beacon Hill townhouse, complete with actors in period costume as John Adams and Paul Revere.

The parent company of cigarette-maker Philip Morris USA paid for lunch for Congressional Black Caucus at a 52nd floor eatery overlooking the Boston skyline. And Citicorp hosted a picture-perfect day of baseball at Fenway Park.

There was golf at the Granite Links, a Caribbean bash with musician Ziggy Marley, finger food at the Four Seasons and receptions sponsored by BellSouth, mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, pharmaceutical firm Pfizer and dozens of other interests.

"TXU welcomes you," said lobbyist Curt Seidlits, whose company provided breakfast – tables of scrambled eggs, sausage, fresh fruit and pastries – for Texas delegates on Monday at their hotel.

Mr. Seidlits said the utility would do the same for Texas Republicans at next month's GOP convention.

Federal law sharply restricts the size of contributions to candidates and political parties, but there are no limits on donations to the convention's host committee (which collected \$40 million in donations, some \$1 million each).

And businesses and lobbyists are free to spend whatever they want on private parties.

Texas lobbyist Ben Barnes' invitation-only reception at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a Venetian-style palace housing 600 years of priceless art, attracted enough members of the Senate to hold a committee meeting. The event was a fund-raiser for the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee, and Mr. Barnes had invited a host of high rollers.

"There's nobody here who can't give \$25,000," Mr. Barnes said, standing in a courtyard resplendent with flowers and ancient sculpture.

Guests walked among the Botticellis and Manets and sipped champagne.

Trial lawyers John O'Quinn of Houston and Wayne Reaud of Beaumont, who shared in the state's \$17 billion tobacco settlement, chatted by the sculpture of Horas. Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont glided past the Renaissance art, shaking hands.

Sen. Jon Corzine of New Jersey greeted Mr. Barnes warmly in the atrium, which soared four stories overhead.

"I've never had anybody reach out and help me more than Ben Barnes," Mr. Corzine said.

Then he threw his arm around Mr. Barnes, the lawmaker and the lobbyist.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S): Ben Barnes

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