

New Senate President's Business Paid Thousands by Local Governments

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By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

New \$481 Senate president Thomas Alexander reported a total of more than \$850,000 in income over a 10-year period from Upstate public agencies through his office supply business, The Nerve found in a review of his annual income-disclosure records.

No one has accused the longtime Oconee County Republican of any wrongdoing. But, as The Nerve previously has [revealed](#), some lawmakers over the years have made a lot of money off government agencies in their home districts.

And when Alexander dons the traditional purple robe to preside Tuesday over the start of the regular legislative session of the 46-member Senate, he'll receive more state pay – plus new appointment powers – that come with the title of president.

Alexander, 65, who served in the S.C. House from 1987-94 before becoming a senator in 1994, was elected the Senate president following the death in November of longtime Senate Finance Committee chairman Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence. Then-Senate president Harvey Peeler, R-Cherokee, resigned his position to become the Finance Committee chairman, and Alexander was elected by his Senate colleagues as president.

In related leadership changes, Sen. Tom Davis, R-Beaufort, took over as chairman of the Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee that Alexander previously headed, while Alexander assumed the chairmanship of two other Senate committees – Legislative Oversight and Interstate Cooperation – that were led by Peeler when he was the president.

Alexander also serves on the Senate Finance, Ethics, Banking and Insurance, and Medical Affairs committees.

In his new role as Senate president, Alexander will be paid an additional \$11,000 yearly, Senate clerk Jeff Gossett confirmed when contacted by The Nerve. Lawmakers typically make a base \$10,400 annual salary, plus receive an additional \$12,000 a year in “in-district” payments, which are considered taxable income in South Carolina.

A 2010 [study](#) by The Nerve found that lawmakers receive on average about \$32,000 yearly in combined salary, reimbursements and expense payments for serving part-time. The Nerve last month [revealed](#) that lawmakers would receive an \$18,000 annual pay hike under a House proposal.

Lawmakers and certain other public officials are required to file annual income-disclosure reports, known as statements of economic interests (SEIs), with the State Ethics Commission, which list public income received in the previous year. The Nerve this week reviewed Alexander's SEIs for public income earned from 2011 through 2020.

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According to his 2012 SEI, which covered income received in 2011, Alexander was the owner of Alexander's Office Supply, Oconee Office Supply and Cleveland Gospel Supply. His most-recent SEI filed in March last year listed Alexander's and Oconee Office Supply as income sources in 2020.

The Nerve's review found that Alexander reported a total of \$863,588 in income from office supplies purchased by local, county and state agencies, mainly in Oconee County, from 2011 through 2020. Following are the top-five largest collective income amounts reported during the period, according to his SEIs:

- Oconee County departments: \$460,698
- Seneca City departments: \$210,533
- Walhalla City departments: \$75,794
- Oconee County Solicitor's Office: \$44,353
- Westminster City departments: \$26,174

Other public agencies that purchased office supplies over the 10-year period included the Oconee County School District and the Pioneer Rural Water District, which generated a total of \$16,344 and \$13,773 in income, respectively, according to his SEIs. He also reported a collective \$1,838 in income during the period from the S.C. Regional Housing Authority and \$915 from the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Alexander, who served on the Walhalla City Council from 1982-85, didn't return phone messages from The Nerve that were left Thursday at his State House office and Alexander's Office Supply, located in Walhalla. Efforts Thursday to reach administrators in Oconee County and the city of Seneca were unsuccessful.

As the Senate president, Alexander will have appointment powers involving a number of state boards, committees and commissions, including, for example, the powerful Judicial Merit Selection Commission (JMSC), which qualifies and nominates judicial candidates for election in the Legislature.

Under state law, the Senate president appoints two of the 10 JMSC members. As The Nerve has [pointed out](#), South Carolina and Virginia are the only two states where their legislatures play primary roles in electing judges.

Alexander also will have the authority as the Senate president to make one or more appointments to other state panels as vacancies occur, including the Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum Commission, Conservation Bank board, Education Oversight Committee, First Steps to School Readiness board, Lottery Commission, Palmetto Pride board, Public Employee Benefit Authority, and the Small Business Regulatory Review Committee, according to records from the S.C. Secretary of State's Office.

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In addition, under an annually renewed state budget proviso, the Senate president has the power to determine the "amount necessary for compensation" for Senate employees from appropriated funds for "Employee Pay Increases."
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Alexander also has been the longtime chairman of the legislatively controlled State Regulation of Public Utilities Review Committee (PURC), which [exercises considerable authority](#) over the regulation of utilities in South Carolina. In an email response this week, PURC attorney Heather Anderson told The Nerve there has been "no change with PURC membership" following the recent Senate leadership reorganization.

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