

# Lobbyist for Archdiocese tries to gut childhood sexual abuse bill



Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory / AJC File Photo

A Georgia legislative proposal to give adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse more time to sue pedophiles and organizations has encountered opposition from the Catholic Church.

A lobbyist for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta proposes gutting a bill that would extend the statute of limitations for lawsuits and make it easier to sue entities that harbored pedophiles.

The Archdiocese is led by a clergyman who was in charge of the U.S. Catholic church's response in the early 2000s to the priest pedophilia scandal and who has publicly spoken out for justice for the victims.

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory [issued a statement](#) Friday after The Atlanta Journal-Constitution sought comment about the church's lobbying effort, saying the bill was "extraordinarily unfair" to the church and would hinder its mission by allowing lawsuits for actions that occurred years ago.

The legislation, dubbed the "Hidden Predator Act," extends the statute of limitations for victims from age 23 to 38, and creates other avenues for adults to sue long after that age. It passed 170-0 on the floor of the House of Representatives, despite what those close to the process say was quiet lobbying by the church, the Boy Scouts and other entities that would face increased exposure to liability.

Proponents of House Bill 605 say many victims don't come forward until after age 40. Opponents say lawsuits involving decades-old incidents would penalize the wrong parties: people involved in organizations today who were not involved when the abuse occurred.

“How can someone reasonably be expected to defend themselves from allegations for something that happened so long ago,” said Charles A. Jones, Jr. “We don’t need endless liability.”

Jones, a lawyer who attends a Catholic church, was a rare public voice of opposition — the only person to speak against the legislation at a House subcommittee hearing last month. The hearing mostly featured wrenching testimony from victims, or relatives of victims, about the lingering damage from pedophilia. The only other contrary voice came at a later hearing from a Washington, D.C. lawyer, who said he was speaking for the American Tort Reform Association and questioned the bill’s constitutionality.

Lobbyists for the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, the Boy Scouts and other organizations filled the room that day, but none spoke.

The bill's chief author, Rep. Jason Spencer, R-Woodbine, [had accused them of working behind the scenes](#). He blames them for amendments that reduced the exposure of organizations, but he had no evidence of their efforts beyond word of mouth until Friday morning. He shared an email with the AJC from the office of the senator whose committee will determine the bill's fate.

Sen. Jesse Stone, R-Waynesboro, chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee. His assistant forwarded Spencer an email from Perry McGuire, a lobbyist for the Catholic Church. McGuire’s amendments would strike the extension of the statute of limitations and make it even more difficult than it is now to sue organizations.

“If they adopt that language from Perry McGuire as a substitute bill, then Georgia will continue to be a predator-friendly state,” Spencer said. It shows “that the Catholic Church is continuing to cover up wickedness.”

McGuire and Stone did not respond to requests for comment. Stone’s committee can hold onto Spencer’s bill until the legislative session ends March 29, effectively killing it.

Sen. Bill Cowsert, the vice chairman of the committee, told the AJC earlier this week that he had no opinion about the bill, though he said he'd [been approached by advocates on both sides](#).

Cowsert didn’t name opponents, but identified one supporter, Darren Penn, a former president of the Georgia Trial Lawyers Association. Cowsert said Penn has a personal stake because he represents alleged victims of sexual abuse and “is trying to alter the law to assist his cases.”

Cowsert, R-Athens, did not reveal that his law firm, Cowsert Heath in Athens, was defending a church in a sexual abuse suit in which Penn is representing the plaintiff.

Cowsert didn’t return a call for comment about the suit Friday, but his chief of staff, Tom Krause, said Cowsert has “no personal involvement” in it.

The Cowsert Heath law firm said neither of the attorneys of record in the suit was available for comment.

While the opponents of HB 605 had been quiet, the advocates were out in the open, sometimes painfully so.

Robert Lawson, who served in the state House more than two decades ago, took a personal interest in the legislation because his son, now in his 40s, told him two years ago that he had been sexually abused by a camp counselor in the 1980s. The former state representative later told the AJC that his son wants to sue, not for the money, but because the criminal statute of limitations had passed and there was no other way to find justice.

(The AJC doesn't ordinarily identify victims of sexual abuse, but Lawson gave permission to use his name.)

Lawson predicted that no senator would openly oppose the bill if it makes it to the floor for a vote.

"But getting it to the floor is proving difficult," he said.

The Catholic Church has publicly acknowledged its role in the devastation of young lives. Gregory handled the clergy pedophilia scandal when he was president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 16 years ago.

He told U.S. bishops at a gathering last spring that "we can never say that we are sorry enough for the share that we have had in this tragedy," according to the Catholic News Service. "We humbly seek forgiveness ... especially from those whose lives may have been devastated by our failure to care adequately for the little ones entrusted to us ... ."

In his statement Friday he wrote the bill was unfair to the church and does not protect anyone.

"Rather, innocent people and the organizations to which they belong will be radically impacted based on allegations against individuals who may no longer even be alive and cannot speak for themselves," he wrote.