

This Top GOP Recruit Has a Swampy Connection to a Trumpy Rep

[October 16, 2023](#) in [News](#), [Politics](#) More Reality about Tim Sheehy



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One of the GOP's best hopes to reclaim control of the U.S. Senate, Montana candidate Tim Sheehy, has made cleaning up the much-maligned "Washington swamp" a **core promise of his campaign**.

As he ramps up his bid in one of the most critical states for determining the Senate majority, Sheehy has [built a case](#) against Sen. Jon Tester that centers on the incumbent Democrat's alleged coziness with lobbyists, after Tester failed to heed his own promise to disclose all lobbyist meetings.

"For him to act as if he is somehow independent from lobbying, and he's not a part of the Washington complex is just fundamentally untrue," Sheehy told [Fox News Digital](#) in September.

But as the CEO of a company that gets the bulk of its revenue from the federal government, Sheehy is more than familiar with what it takes to work the Washington complex that he rails against.

Bridger Aerospace, a Montana-based aerial firefighting company which Sheehy founded and still runs, has reaped millions of dollars from the same system that Sheehy has decried as a candidate, according to a review of government contracts, **lobbying disclosures, and political donations**.

Those connections have already become a key argument against Sheehy's campaign. What is less known is the relationship that could explain his lucrative

business with the federal government: the one he shares with his friend Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-MT), a politician who may embody some of the swamiest practices Sheehy is pledging to curb.

Years ago, when Zinke was Secretary of the Interior in the Trump administration, his department awarded Sheehy's company its very first contract. Since then, Sheehy and his family have gone on to shower their fellow Montana Republican with political contributions, while Bridger lobbied to pass industry-friendly legislation introduced by Zinke.

Sheehy and his family have donated nearly \$50,000 to Zinke's campaigns since last January, all while Zinke has pushed legislation that would benefit Bridger.

None of this activity is illegal. But these kinds of insider relationships and legislative wheel-greasing have become a top target for politicians in both parties who are looking to polish their populist bona fides, including Sheehy.

Stephen Spaulding, vice president of policy at the good government group Common Cause, told The Daily Beast that the Sheehy-Zinke relationship—consisting of major campaign contributions, federal contracts, and favorable legislation—was the exact kind of “pungent mix” that gives voters the impression that elected officials put corporate money over the public interest.

Americans, Spaulding said, are “rightly turned off” by such relationships.

“It’s what gives rise to corruption and the appearance of corruption, and the perception that the public interest is taking a back seat to a corporation’s bottom line,” Spaulding said. “It is all too common in Washington and it’s why we need to strengthen laws to guard against pay to play politics.”

Jordan Libowitz, communications director for Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, echoed that point, observing that the relationship between Sheehy and Zinke illustrates “the reality” of money in politics.

“Americans like to think that campaign donations are twenty bucks here and there to support a candidate you believe in,” Libowitz told The Daily Beast. “But the reality is major money moves around getting federal contracts and lawmakers voting in a certain way.”

While noting these transactions aren't illegal, Libowitz said, "it's not what a lot of Americans may consider to be ethical."

Neither the Sheehy campaign, Zinke's office, nor Bridger Aerospace replied to The Daily Beast's requests for comment.

Today, Sheehy is [considered one of the GOP's top recruits](#) for 2024. Although Tester has [defied political gravity before](#), Sheehy has an appealing profile for this increasingly conservative state: like Zinke, he is a retired Navy SEAL. In addition to founding Bridger, [he also runs a sprawling ranch](#) in central Montana.

With Democrats defending a narrow Senate majority next year, Sheehy's recruitment gives the GOP their best chance to flip a must-win state—if the candidate win a primary over far-right Rep. Matt Rosendale (R-MT), who is likely to mount a campaign himself. (Even though Rosendale lost to Tester in 2018, he [holds a slight lead over Sheehy](#) in the most recent primary polling.)

Since Sheehy launched his campaign, Bridger—the enterprise that fueled his considerable fortune—[has received press scrutiny](#) for its business relationship with the federal government.

If elected, Sheehy could present a potentially novel new conflict of interest: [the first sitting senator in charge of a private company that holds millions of dollars in federal contracts](#). While Sheehy has promised to step aside as CEO if he wins, he has not said whether he will divest from Bridger, which is publicly traded.

Sheehy has already blurred his CEO and candidate roles on the campaign trail, NBC News previously [reported](#). Although he's promised to apply "the strictest interpretation of applicable ethical norms and federal campaign finance laws" as CEO and is not supposed to use company funds for any work in public service—per the company's own ethics and code of conduct policy—he has not elaborated on how he would implement such an ethics hawk approach.

In what is almost certainly a sign of more [self-funding](#) to come, Sheehy already cut a [\\$500,000](#) loan to his campaign, according to the campaign's first Federal Election Commission filing, released on Sunday. The filing also shows that the campaign has paid Bridger roughly \$32,000 from July through September, for expenses listed as office space and flights.

Sheehy's lucrative work traces back to Zinke, an anti-regulation hardliner [who resigned as Trump's Interior Secretary](#) in 2018 as he faced scrutiny for a range of alleged ethical breaches and professional misconduct.

The two men may have first met in 2015, when Zinke—then a congressman—awarded Sheehy a Bronze Star Medal and Purple Heart for his military service. Since, Sheehy has described Zinke as a personal friend.

Bridger, which first registered as a Montana company in 2014, had never received a federal contract in the contract-dependent industry of aerial firefighting until Jan. 2018—nine months after Zinke took over at the Interior Department. That month, [federal spending records show](#), Interior steered a contract to Bridger alias "[Mountain Air LLC.](#)" It has since paid out about \$2 million.

Bridger landed three other federal contracts under Zinke's brief tenure as Interior secretary, federal records show, including a first-of-its-kind "on demand" services contract for unmanned aerial wildfire surveillance. When Zinke [announced](#) the contract in May 2018, he said the contract "reinforces our commitment to partnering with industry."

Zinke, however—a secretary too allegedly corrupt for even the Trump administration—didn't last long at Interior. He resigned in December 2018, [amid a swirl](#) of federal investigations and accusations of conflicts of interest.

But Sheehy's company kept and nurtured its contractual relationship with the federal government. Today, Sheehy's company holds multimillion-dollar contracts with Interior and the Department of Agriculture's U.S. Forest Service, which taps the company's fleet of "scooper" helicopters to douse lake water onto fires. The federal government also uses Bridger aerial drones and has had a passenger craft contract.

Last year, federal clients accounted for 96 percent of Bridger's \$47 million revenue last year, according to its [annual report](#) with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Ultimately, Bridger banked millions of dollars from its work under Zinke, according to federal spending data. But the company cultivated that relationship to such an extent that Bridger appears [existentially dependent on the government](#) for revenue.

As Sheehy's company flourished, Sheehy's political relationship with Zinke also evolved.

Until 2020, Sheehy only appears to have **given a total of \$250** to candidates for federal office, according to FEC [records](#). But in 2020, a corporate buyer [scooped up](#) another Sheehy entity—aerial imaging specialists Ascent Vision Technologies—for a cool \$350 million.

That same year, Bridger began expanding its federal contracts, Bloomberg previously [reported](#). And Sheehy [ramped up his donations](#).

So when Zinke launched his **2022** congressional campaign after cooling his heels for three years, Sheehy was behind him. Between January 2022 and June of this year, **Sheehy and three of his close family members contributed nearly \$50,000** combined to Zinke's campaign and leadership PAC, according to FEC data.

Most of it, however, came this year—after Zinke was already elected. And those 2023 donations appear to align with Bridger's lobbying efforts on legislation that Zinke had sponsored.

In March, for instance, Sheehy and his wife contributed roughly \$15,000 to Zinke and his leadership **PAC soon after** the congressman introduced a bill that aimed to make **fire retardants exempt** from federal environmental restrictions. Bridger had retained lobbying firm Collective Strategies the month before Zinke announced the bill, federal lobbying disclosures [show](#).

In his brief [official statement](#) announcing the bill on March 15, Zinke singled out Sheehy's company by name, saying, "I've stood in Elmo, Montana, and watched scoopers from Bridger Aerospace save homes, ranches and lives. Denying wildland firefighters the ability to implement their most efficient fire retardant technology is like sending troops into battle without air support."

Twelve days later, the couple joined up with Sheehy's brother and business partner, Matt—chairman of Bridger and Ascent Vision Technologies—to kick **another \$20,000 to Zinke**, all on May 3, per FEC [data](#). (Matt Sheehy's gift to the leadership PAC exceeded the individual contribution limit, and \$5,000 was reallocated to his wife in June.) Bridger paid Collective Strategies **\$20,000** over the same timeline to **lobby for that specific piece** of legislation, [disclosures show](#).

The Zinke bill that coincided with the Sheehy family donations could have a significant impact on Bridger’s bottom line.

Zinke and fellow Republicans proposed a carveout to the Clean Water Act to allow “scooper” helicopter firefighting fleets to use fire retardant instead of fresh water. There are notable environmental and practical concerns with using fire retardant, particularly the risk of killing fish and other local wildlife.

In May, a federal judge ruled the use of [fire retardant violated U.S. law](#), stopping just short of banning the Forest Service from using it.

If elected, Sheehy would find himself in a unique position, and would need to take steps to clear his conflicts of interest.

In response to [Bloomberg’s questions](#) this summer, Sheehy’s campaign said that he would step down as Bridger CEO and give up his seat on the board. However, the campaign has not publicly said whether Sheehy would divest his stakes in the company—which is also publicly traded on the NASDAQ exchange—or whether he’d place his holdings in a blind trust. They have also not answered questions **about future roles for Sheehy’s immediate family.**

Spaulding, of Common Cause, told The Daily Beast that he **couldn’t think of any precedent where a sitting senator owned a private company that held federal contracts.** Elected officials should observe “the highest ethical standards,” he said, and argued Sheehy’s constituents deserve to know whether he will cut all ties, including divestiture.

“That should include severing any ties once in office from their former business that profits from government contracts,” Spaulding said.

Libowitz, of CREW, told The Daily Beast that Sheehy’s election would precipitate ethical and legal questions. But Sheehy, he said, can also exercise a large degree of control over how his relationships and motivations are publicly perceived.

“As long as he and his family hold a major ownership stake in the company, and the company continues to pursue federal contracts,” Libowitz said, “his constituents will question whether he’s acting purely in their interests or whether he’s using his position in a way to financially benefit himself.”

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