

State's open meeting law should be respected

Transparency in government and access to public records are not a luxury reserved only for members of the media.

Tennessee's open meetings law, called the Sunshine Law, is a safeguard for members of the public, designed to ensure the process of running the people's business is done so in full view of the citizens the officials are elected to represent.

Members of the media are often the beneficiaries of the protection offered by the Sunshine Law, though many others in the community also act as advocates for open government with the same authority granted by Tennessee's legislation.

Unfortunately the laws on the books are not easily enforceable, and many times elected officials are called upon to police themselves and discourage violations.

It seems apparent the Sunshine Law is broken regularly and with intent by members of local elected commissions, councils and boards.

Recently decisions made by members of the Loudon County Board of Education appear to be in violation of state law.

During their meeting last week, members of the board discussed allegations of conversations which took place outside of public meetings in regard to the appointment of the board's chairman. Scott Newman retained his position as board chairman, even though it is traditional on the board to make the previous year's vice-chairman, Gary Ubben in this case, the new chairman.

During the meeting Newman said he had received a phone call from Board Member Bill Marcus discussing the chairman position. When asked after the meeting Newman denied any discussions about board officers had taken place outside of meetings.

The board heard other accusations of open-meeting violations, including a lack of minutes for the director's evaluation committee meeting in March.

Politicians seem to have a desire to control as much information as possible, and one means to that end is the regular practice of discussing public business in private.

It's a shame and an offense against the people they represent. Some elected officials in Loudon County appear to be more concerned with pushing through their personal agendas than with acting on the best interests of those they are representing.

Newman, who voted to keep himself chairman, made a point to express how good a job he's done, though at times during Thursday's meeting he appeared to be unsure of protocol and procedures. Perhaps the vote to keep him in a position of leadership was less of a vote for Newman as it was a vote against Ubben.

The board seems to be struggling to work together even on matters as routine as electing officers among themselves. An earlier vote for Newman to retain the position with Lisa Russell as vice-chairman failed, partly because two board members, Craig Simon and Bobby Johnson abstained from voting with no apparent reason.

Elected officials who choose not to cast a vote, in public, due to the potential conflict and backlash that may occur, are failing their respective constituents, and should give careful consideration to taking that route.

Ironically, they both voted in favor of Newman and Ubben's eventual appointments, which seemed the safer choice.

Board member William Jenkins abstained from a vote regarding the contract extension of current Loudon County School Director Wayne Honeycutt earlier in the meeting. He reasoned his lack of time on the board and having no working knowledge with the head of the system left him with no basis to form his opinion. In that particular instance, the decision not to cast a vote is warranted.

Backroom deals done prior to that particular meeting, or any other governmental body, suggest to us that those officials involved either have very little regard for the voters who elected them, or the law, and quite possibly both.

We expect our elected officials to represent us in a respectful and appropriate way, above board, and in the light ... of the sunshine law.