

Faulty fee plan

Don't discourage citizen interest in local government public records

County Mayor Doyle Arp has jumped back on his "fee for records" bandwagon and it appears he's ready to roll it over the rights of Loudon County citizens.

We hope county commissioners are civic-minded enough and respect their constituents enough to derail this ill-conceived bandwagon before it makes our county a statewide and perhaps even a national example of poor public policy.

Arp has prepared a resolution detailing procedures for accessing and copying public records including a "fee schedule for copies of public records" which will be up for a vote at the Feb. 5 commission meeting. He first brought up this notion of charging citizens for the time it takes county employees to gather and copy records shortly after he was elected a few months ago.

While the new proposal does not include the non-refundable up-front \$25 charge he originally wanted to impose, it contains enough stipulations and other fees to effectively discourage some citizens from seeking public information, in our estimation.

We can understand the 7 cents per page requested for copy paper – and applaud the reduction from the original 25 cents per page Arp had proposed. What doesn't make good sense to us is the additional payments requested for the county employee's time to make the copies.

According to Arp's proposed fee schedule, no one would have to pay extra if they can get the requested information provided to them in 59 seconds or less. But as soon as a county worker spends one full minute or more on the task, the charges would start racking up.

The county mayor has determined a citizen should pay \$2.34 if it takes a county employee one to six minutes to make copies of public documents. From seven to 12 minutes of a county employee's time is worth \$4.69, according to Arp. The increments go up and up, topping out at \$23.47 for 55 to 60 minutes.

What happened to the notion of those who accept their paychecks from taxpayer funds being considered public servants? Haven't taxpayers already paid them for their time?

If Arp has his way, Loudon County taxpayers will provide the money for the worker's salary, insurance and other benefits when they pay their taxes. Then they'll have to pay for the worker's time all over again when they seek assistance with public records. The way we see it, that's double dipping into a taxpayer's pocket and every single citizen in our county should find it unacceptable.

If this proposal gets county commission approval, what's next? Will local residents one day be asked to pay extra for every single question asked of a county employee? For every step workers take as they approach visitors at the front desk? For every time they pick up a phone to respond to an inquiry?

Could we expect future proposals to have citizens pay extra whenever they actually use any county services at all? Would we have to pull out the checkbook when we call for a

deputy after a crime has been committed? Would we have to hand over a wad of cash to request a parent/teacher conference? These notions should be considered just as outlandish as Arp's proposed fee schedule for copies of public records.

If county employees' time is so precious they cannot spare any of it to respond to citizen inquiries in a timely manner as part of their regular and expected duties, we think the priorities at the county level are way off kilter.

Response to citizen requests for public information should be considered a normal part of business in any county office supported by taxpayer funds. No one should be asked to pay for anything more than the cost of copy paper and use of a copy machine – period.

We acknowledge Arp's frustration with operating county business as effectively and efficiently as possible when some citizens make overwhelming requests for time-consuming research and stacks of document copies. The incident he said inspired this fee proposal involved one person's request, which required two full days of a worker's time to fulfill.

Just as we expect county officials and employees to meet the public's needs, we expect members of the public to be cognizant of the many duties county employees are responsible for in addition to citizen requests for records. Those seeking extensive amounts of public records should be mindful of the burden they are placing on county offices. They should make their requests in a respectful way with the understanding that county business cannot be brought to a grinding halt to instantly comply with their wishes.

However, all citizens of the county should not be forced to pay for the alleged abuses of a few. Whether or not it was his intention, it appears that may just be what Arp's proposal would accomplish.

Tennessee's Public Records Act is designed to give the fullest possible public access to public records. Arp's proposal would place a financial burden on this process some citizens simply might not be able to afford. We strongly suspect his proposed fee schedule would discourage some people from getting public records they have every right to view and copy.

Good government welcomes public scrutiny. Putting roadblocks in front of public records would encourage government secrecy and in turn, distrust of the county officials who make it more difficult to obtain public information.

Power can be a wonderful thing when it is wielded in the spirit of the common good. However, power directed against the rights of the public should be stopped dead in its tracks or at the very least, held in check.

We hope Loudon County Commissioners will put a firm stop to this notion of charging fees to citizens who want public records. It would be the right and honorable course of action.