

1-22-2000

Our View

Openness is key to good bureaucracy

Good government will only occur in the North Hills — or anywhere else — when citizens pay attention.

Of course, paying attention is sometimes more difficult in Pennsylvania than in other areas of the nation because of its weak laws regarding open meetings and public access to government records.

Openness is the key to good government.

Open meetings and open records force elected officials and government bureaucrats to be accountable for their decisions. Openness allows the public to study the reasons behind government decisions and at least understand, if not agree, with those decisions.

Despite their best intentions, government officials have a natural tendency to keep things secret, as if the public's business

must be guarded somehow from the public itself. The behavior of township supervisors and school board members seems to confirm the well-known observation of 19th-century English historian Lord Acton: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

But citizens tend to allow that corruption to occur. They fail to watch government at work. They fail to voice their opinions about issues. They fail to insist upon their rights to information for which they pay. They fail to understand that government exists only with the consent — and the dollars — of its constituents.

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Yes, keeping an eye on the local school board or township commissioners is sometimes difficult and time-consuming. However, the alternative means yielding control — and the power to spend your money — to fewer and fewer people.

Elected officials and bureaucrats are more than happy to seize the power relinquished by inattentive citizens.

We're not suggesting that political corruption runs rampant through the North Hills. But government in the North Hills does manifest an old Pennsylvanian notion that the less said in public, the better.

The North Allegheny School District provides the most recent example. The school board announced Friday it had reached a tentative salary contract with the district teachers union. No details about the contract have been released, nor will they be until Wednesday, just before the board votes on the agreement.

Teacher salaries and benefits are the single most expensive item on any school district budget. In the North Hills, homeowners pay the largest portion of their real estate taxes to their school districts. North Allegheny taxpayers have a large stake in the new contract, yet they won't get to learn much about it until it is too late to make a difference.

As we've suggested to other school districts, the board should have a public hearing solely to review the details of the proposed contract and then allow public comment for a week before voting on ratification.

Rushing the approval process signals to citizens that there is nothing they can do to influence the tentative contract, even though that is not true.

Most school districts handle contract agreements the same way, so North Allegheny's approach is far from unique. Although there is no law that compels school boards to give the public a chance to read and comment on contract proposals, there is nothing that prevents them from doing it.

At the same time, there is nothing in Pennsylvania's open meetings law that compels government agencies to meet in secret. Nonetheless, public officials always are trying to use the law to justify private meetings.

Citizens can make a difference in these matters by insisting their local governments become more open. Elected officials will respond to constituents who show an interest. Citizens also can insist that laws be changed and improved to give more access to public documents and government deliberations.

Don't let your elected representatives relax into secrecy. Be vigilant. Public business should be conducted in public.