Don’t take it personally? That’s usually good advice, but today we urge the opposite reaction to government bodies operating in the shadows, purposely avoiding public scrutiny and genuine transparency.

In other words, take closed government personally.

• Take it personally when a reporter is kicked out of a city council meeting so members can hold an illegal or unnecessary executive session.
• Take it personally when public access to government records is denied, limited or attached to excessive fees.
• Take it personally when a judge jails a reporter for revealing a confidential source.
• Take it personally when government fails to limit political contributions, and ignores ties of mutual benefit between private business and elected officials.

Ten Commandments for open meetings

By Brian J. Hunhoff

“I think heroic deeds were all conceived in the open air.”
— Walt Whitman

The quote above this editorial is from Walt Whitman’s Song of the Open Road—a cheerful 1856 tribute to freedom and the great outdoors.

Fortunately, Mr. Whitman would have approved of his prose to promote open, well-aired government. It’s unlikely the great poet favored government secrecy and closed-door meetings. He also wrote, “Out of the dark confinement, out from behind the screen!”

For today’s purposes, Whitman’s “screen” represents the executive session—a self-important term for a classic oxymoron: closed public meeting.

Too many elected boards seek every opportunity to meet out of sight of the public they serve. Some schedule executive sessions as a regular agenda item. Some hold up to three executive sessions in a single meeting. Some have executive sessions that last longer than the open portion of their meeting.

In most cases, executive sessions do not violate open meeting laws. The closed-door discussions are often illegal or unnecessary executive sessions. Members should hold their executive sessions to discuss policy issues. Example: Creating a new position or changing a department’s job descriptions are policy decisions and not appropriate topics for a closed meeting.

Five do not allow executive session conversations to stray to other topics.

• SEVEN. Do not violate the spirit of the open meeting law with frequent phone, email or text dialogues with other members. Reach consensus at the meeting.

• EIGHT. Do not make a habit of whispering or passing notes at meetings. Were you elected to speak for us? Tell us what you have to say out loud and proud!

• NINE. Allow public input at every meeting. Include it on your agenda.

• TEN. Be as transparent as possible. Do not hold executive sessions simply because counsel advised it is “legal.” Do it yourself. “Is it absolutely critical we discuss this privately?”

That should be the test because legality and necessity are two different things. We appreciate our local commissioners and board members. They serve for minimal compensation. They make tough decisions. They sometimes lose friends and make enemies. Their dedication to community is admirable.

We simply ask elected officials to think twice before kicking the public out of open meetings. Strive for fewer. Less is more. A closed meeting should be a rare occasion, not a habit.

About

Brian Hunhoff is a community journalist from Yankton, South Dakota. He is a two-time winner of the Golden Quill award for editorial writing from the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors.

• Take it personally when a governor issues secretive pardons.

• Take it personally when a presidential administration works vigorously to identify and criminally prosecute government whistleblowers.

• Take all of the above personally because it directly affects the quality and scope of government information you have at your presses.

Wouldn’t it be great if more people understood a reporter’s exclusion from a meeting also excludes them, the general public, from learning details that are being hidden?

Wouldn’t it be great if everyone embraced the notion that government openness is an essential pillar of democracy?

Wouldn’t it be great if more people remembered the press serves as their eyes and ears in the halls of government?

Wouldn’t it be great if more people became aware that jailing journalists not only intimidates the press, but also chills the public’s right to know?

Wouldn’t it be great to see thousands of citizens press Congress to pass a federal shield law and protecting reporters from being locked up for doing their job?

There is a moving scene in Return of the King where a resurgent monarch inspires his small army to stand against overwhelming odds by delivering a stirring cry to arms.

Wouldn’t it be great to see people everywhere show that kind of passion and unity in the fight for freedom of information and the battle against government secrecy? With apologies to J.R. Tolkien, that speech might go something like this:

“A day may come when the courage of men fails and when speech and religion are governed; when we forsake our reporteurs and break all bonds of fellowship with the Fourth Estate, but it is not this day! There may come an hour of darkness, wolves and shattered shields that bring our First Amendment crashing down, but it is not this day!”

“On this day, we battle for our Bill of Rights! This day, we join with journalists everywhere in the war against government secrecy, corruption, and waste!”

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women’s meetings, First Parish Congregational Church, Saco; noon and 7 p.m., 63 School St., Saco, FMI, visit www.csoaamaine.org.

Russ Center activities include cribbage, 10 a.m., walking, 11:45 a.m. to 12:45 p.m., dominos, 1 to 4 p.m., indoor horseshoes, 7 to 9 p.m., and karaoke, 7 to 9 p.m., every third month, FMI, call 282-5005. Russ Center is located at J.R. Martin Community Center, 189 Alfred St., Biddeford.

You’ve Got Me in Stitches, 1:30 p.m, meeting room, Dyer Library, Saco. Knit, crochet, chat and sip tea or coffee. No registration required.

Bingo, 1 to 3 p.m., Saco Armory, 75 Franklin St, Saco, sponsored by Open Door Senior Club.

Le Club Francais, 6:30 p.m, McArthur Library, Biddeford FMI, call 284-4181.

Seeds of Hope Neighborhood Center, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., 35 South St., Biddeford. Drop in for a free cup of coffee and snack, conversation, games, lending library and warmth. An outreach of Christ Episcopal Church, FMI, call 283-1783.

Friday, April 8

“As You Like It,” performed by UNE Players, 7:30 p.m., City Theater, Main Street, Biddeford. Tickets available at the door. This abridged version includes original music and explores how bewilderment yet utterly pleasurable life can be. FMI, call 602-2556.

Fine fare, through April 19, Libby Library, 27 Staple St., Old Orchard Beach. Return overdue materials with no fine in exchange for pet food being collected for Community Animal Welfare Society.

Community forum on opioids, 6 to 8 p.m., 630 Pool St., UNE, Biddeford. FMI, visit www.une.edu/brain.

UNE Brain, Body and Wellness Fair, 4 to 8 p.m., 630 Pool St., Biddeford. Fun and engaging activities for the entire family, free and open to the public, www.une.edu/brain.

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