THEIR VIEW

Lessons for open meetings

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

The quote atop this editorial is from Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself. First published in 1855, it broods about freedom and the great outdoors. Hopefully, Mr. Whitman would have approved use of his prose to promote open government. It’s unlikely the great poet favored government secrecy and closed-door meetings. He also wrote, “Out of the dark conflagration, baring his nakedness, the sun emerges.”

For today’s purposes, Whitman’s “credenza” resonates with the executive session, a sad, important term for a classic oxymoron: closed policy-making.

Too many elected boards seek every opportunity to close the public out of their meetings. Some schedule executive sessions as a way to avoid addressing controversial issues in a single meeting. Some have executive sessions that last longer than the open portion of their meeting. They sometimes lose friends and make enemies. Their dedication to community is celebrated, but legality and necessity are two different terms.

Consider the following list our Fourth Estate counsel composed for commissioners, city councils, and school boards everywhere on executive sessions and parent/guest government openness. Citizens should hold their elected officials to the standards laid out in these Ten Commandments for Open Meetings.

1) You should not gather as a group outside of regular meetings, and do not hold special meetings without giving notice in advance of the public notice.
2) You may not add last-minute changes to the agenda, and do not act on anything prior to its designated time.
3) Do not abuse the litigation excuse for executive sessions to speculate about pending lawsuits.
4) Do not solicit the personal excusation of members for sessions to discuss policy issues. For Example: Creating a new position or changing a department’s budget is not a decision that is appropriate for a closed meeting.
5) Do not tie up the “negotiations” excuse to suddenly close the public in discussion of controversial issues that were previously aired thoroughly in open session.
6) Do not allow executive session conversations to stray to other topics.
7) Do not abuse the litigation excuse in order to pass votes or cover small or text dialogues with other members. Reach consensus at the meeting.
8) Do not make a habit of whispering or pallidly asking questions, while a group speaks in secret. Talk. Tell what you have to say out loud and in public.
9) None: Allow public input at every meeting. Include it on every agenda.

We simply ask elected officials to think twice before keeping the public out of meetings.

Strive for fewer. Less is more. A closed meeting should be a rare occasion, not a habit.

Brian Hanson is the editor of the Columbus Landmark.

Sherron Brown
Certifying Editor

Protect pension benefits

Last week, I met with Rita Lewis of West Mansfield, Ohio. Rita was an active laborer for the United Steelworkers of America (USWA). She was a member of their pension trust fund. Butch worked as a trucker for 40 years with the promise that his pension would be there to care for him after he retired. But for Butch and Rita and thousands more Ohio retirees, that promise is under threat.

A law Congress passed two years ago allows pension trustees to propose massive cuts to the earned benefits of retirees. This is running on hard times. This is disgraceful. If a pension fund is in bad shape, it’s our job to fix it — not to break our promises to Ohioans who have worked their whole lives to earn that pension. I believe that two years ago when I voted on a big budget cut that allowed these proposed cuts, and I believe it was wrong.

That’s why I have introduced two bills — the Miners Protection Act and the Keep Central States Pension Act. The United Miners of America’s Workers of America pension trust fund was almost completely funded before the financial collapse in 2008, but the plan is now in bad shape, putting the health care benefits and pensions of retirees at risk in jeopardy. The 1974 pension plan included more than 100,000 unionmembers, and included thousands of Ohioans. Teamsters — including more than 400,000 unionmembers, whose pensions are part of the Central States Pension Fund are facing a similar crisis.

Miners workers, employed by the industry that has sustained the Ohio economy forward. They deserve the full pension and health benefits they have been promised, and that they worked a lifetime to earn.

Rita Lewis led the Southeast Retirees against the cuts put forth by the union. They teamsters worked in coalmines or behind the screen. They organize to protect the pensions of thousands of Ohio retirees.

The quote atop this editorial is from Walt Whitman. Hopefully, Mr. Whitman would have approved use of his prose to promote open government. He was a long-hauler of thousands.

The problem is that the right itself is exercised not in the abstract but in the concrete – in the ways a young person develops the habit of probing, questioning, weighing facts, deciding a position, understanding the sources, the barriers, the politics and economics of access to information by and about the government.

It is stories that young readers come to understand what lies behind the published narratives, the editorial, the decision, the report, the analysis or research, the information. And the role of a free press are difficult to unearth; in the midst of a campaign, the media’s attention crisscrossed the state to drive home a point, to reach the voters, their families, and drive our economy forward. They deserve the full pension and health benefits they have been promised, and that they worked a lifetime to earn.

That’s why members of Ohio’s Senate Finance and Economics Committees are fighting against cuts to the pensions of thousands of Ohio retirees. Their view

Young people and the right to information

The right to know is the birthright of every child born in this democracy. The challenge is to recognize and nurture that right, to inculcate the attitudes and skills that make it a reality. The welfare of the child and the nation depends on the exercise of this fundamental right.

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