

Editor's note: This article was originally published in a slightly different form in The Everett Herald on April 3, 2010.

GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

Public officials are there to serve you

By Bill Will

As citizens of Washington, you have the not unreasonable expectation that your elected leaders — in fact, all public employees — are acting in your best interests.

But it pays to remember that expectations and actual performance are two different things. And it's your job as a citizen (and smart money management as a taxpayer) to be regularly looking over the shoulder of the elected leaders at city hall, the county seat and the statehouse. Also needing that scrutiny are the school board and the fire and port districts and other less visible public agencies.

Any public agency that uses your tax dollars and governs in your name is held to a very high standard of accountability and transparency under Washington state laws, two in particular: the Washington Open Public Meetings Act and Open Public Records Act.

The first mandates that the governing bodies of public agencies meet at a specified time and ensures members of the public — taxpayers — are allowed to attend. The records laws (the product of a citizen initiative in 1972) ensures that the information gathered and produced by government, in all of its paper and electronic forms, is the property of the people and the people are entitled to see it.

It all sounds very simple and straightforward. The reality is a lot more complicated.

Despite the clear mandates of the open meetings and open records law and the precise language of our state constitution, too many elected leaders and public employees forget the bedrock tenet of democracy: Power belongs to the people.

Elected officials are our employees, not our rulers. And their underlings are also proxies of the people. They answer to the same boss: you. And when the boss wants to look over your shoulder or asks for a copy of the monthly budget numbers, the employees provide it.

That sounds pretty straightforward, but here's where it gets messy. That means a Snohomish County elected official or county worker has 700,000 bosses. A front desk employee in the city of Monroe has 15,000 direct supervisors.

Just as obviously, no employee is going to keep all 700,000 bosses happy. And yes, doing your day-to-day job can become difficult if even a tiny fraction of those supervisors show up regularly to demand a report or offer some input.

It's an understandable (and wrong) reaction by government to that cacophony to blanch at openness

and direct democracy and restrict access by their constituents to both meetings and information. They just need some peace and quiet to get their jobs done!

The result? Too often, it's secret (and illegal) meetings out of earshot of dissenting voices and stubborn refusals to turn over documents to curious constituents. Don't like it? Sue us. And, oh, we'll be represented in court by a lawyer your tax dollars are paying for. You're free to hire counsel on your own dime.

That doesn't change the basic equation of the boss/employees relationship, however. Any public employee — particularly an elected one — risks looking for a job come next election day if he or she doesn't keep at least a slim majority of the bosses (the people) happy.

The result is a delicate dance among government, government watchdogs and the public at large. Citizens must constantly remind our public officials who's the boss.

Bill Will is general manager of Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, the statewide trade association of community newspapers. He is a longtime board member of the Washington Coalition for Open Government.