

GUEST COLUMN

Closed-door politics

BY BOB LINVILLE

Each fall, politicians unfailingly proclaim their commitment to "open government" or "complete transparency" in their campaign literature. Regardless of political inclination, this is simply good government.

New York State's Open Meetings Law declares that "it is essential to the maintenance of a democratic society that the public business be performed in an open and public manner and that the citizens of this state be fully aware of and able to observe the performance of public officials and attend and listen to the deliberations that go into the making of public policy."

I have concerns with the current Hyde Park Town Board's actions in light of two aspects of this law. The first is that during the past five months, the town board, under Supervisor Tom Martino, has gone into "executive session" an unusual number of times. That shouldn't necessarily raise alarm bells, but given the lack of any real public discussion on items on which they are going to vote, one begins to wonder what is going on behind those closed doors.

The Open Meetings Law allows executive sessions (all present must first unanimously agree) when sensitive subjects must be addressed. Those are limited to:

- issues relating to imminent threats to public safety,
- information regarding law enforcement and prosecution,
- discussions about lawsuits for or against the town,
- employment matters,
- grading of examinations, and
- the proposed sale or purchase of assets if public discussion would affect their value.

The board is required, when the motion is made to enter executive session, "to identify the general area of the subject to be considered." At many sessions, no reason has been offered. Why does this matter? The law provides the answer: "People must be able to remain informed if they are to retain control over those who are their public servants."

Again, it is fair to ask, what is going on? Surely they cannot be spending much time on evaluating terrorist threats, interviewing job seekers or selling property.

The second concern I have is that the Open Meetings Law specifies that no more than two board members should meet to discuss

town business behind closed doors, unless in publicly announced executive session. If we are not seeing deliberations in public workshops, where, when and by whom are these decisions being made?

As a former councilman, I am acutely aware that having frank discussions and disagreements in workshops can be uncomfortable and that public criticism can sting, but that is part of what it means to be a representative of the people all year long, not just at election time.

Furthermore, the law provides, "People must be able to remain informed if they are to retain control over those who are their public servants." Those residents who take the time to attend meetings and question officials are finding their input less and less welcome. Recent special meeting agendas have included resolutions that involve spending our money with no public comment allowed. Most disturbingly, the supervisor and board members have belittled those who dare to question their actions. Of particular note was their attitude toward John Bickford of the planning board and Victoria Kampf, former chairwoman of the town's Route 9G Corridor Committee. Others have reported they no longer attend meetings because they know they will not be heard.

The current board was duly elected and can enact or rescind whatever laws they deem fit. But they are still accountable to those of us who live here. How can we evaluate their actions if all the important discussions are withheld from public scrutiny?

We can't.

I'll close just as our Open Meetings Law does. "(Openness) is the only climate under which the commonweal will prosper and enable the governmental process to operate for the benefit of those who created it." As long as important issues affecting our everyday lives are shielded from view, guess who is benefiting? It's not you and I.

Bob Linville resides in Staatsburg and represented Ward 1 on the Town Board for six years. The Hyde Park Democratic Committee encourages thoughtful discussion of the issues that affect Hyde Parkers. We want to hear from you: hydeparkdems@gmail.com.

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