

Longview
News-Journal
Longview, TX
Circ. 30308
From Page:
2b
3/8/2004
96546



Perry wants open talks behind closed doors

60
180
AUSTIN — Public servants can come up with all kinds of excuses for keeping the public shut out of the public's business, but Gov. Rick Perry recently came up with a doozy.

Asked why he chose to lock the media and other taxpayers out of the first meeting of the Governor's Management Council, composed of the governor and the heads of 11 important state agencies, Perry said he didn't want to impede the "true free flow of information."

(This is not to be confused with the Governor's Bahamas Beach Club, which also has private meetings. More about that later.)

Perry said the presence of outsiders, particularly news reporters, could inhibit "clear and truthful" discussion by management council members. Some members, he said, could be afraid to publicly float an idea because they "haven't thought it completely through."

My, my. Perhaps Perry hasn't noticed that people in government routinely open their mouths before fully engaging their brains. If that custom were restricted, legislative sessions and city council meetings would be much, much shorter.

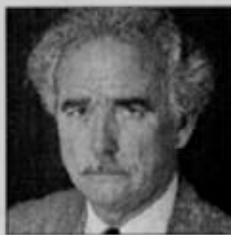
The governor, intentionally or not, missed the point. The "free flow of information," he seems to forget, should include all the people for whom he works.

The standard for governmental bodies should be what benefits the public, not what may intimidate or embarrass policy-makers. The public has much more to fear from a half-baked or special interest idea that is broached by governmental officials in private than one that is discussed in public. There is never a guarantee, of course, that a bad idea won't become law or public policy. But the more light that is cast on an idea from the beginning, the better the chance that taxpayers can make their opinions heard.

And if a few taxpayers sitting in the room prompt a member of a public board to think a little harder, so much the better.

The governor's office argues that the new management council isn't covered by the Texas Open Meetings Act. But Perry could open the meetings to the public anyway, and he should.

As reported by the Houston Chronicle, agencies rep-



**CLAY
ROBISON**

resented on the council are responsible for carrying out a wide range of major state policies — including education, health and human services, transportation, insurance and environmental protection — at a time of budget tightening and governmental reorganization of critical importance to taxpayers.

Maybe this group won't actually vote on policy changes, but, sooner or later, agencies that the council represents will make decisions, and the sooner the public is brought into the loop, the better.

Unlike the president of the United States, the governor of Texas doesn't

have a Cabinet, at least not an official one. But Perry does have his Bahamas Beach Club, a select group of mostly right-wing contributors and advisers who recently shared — in island privacy well outside the purview of the Texas open meetings law — some sun, surf and counsel with the governor.

The subject was school finance and taxes, which Perry continues to dangle as possible subjects for a special legislative session this spring.

Expenses for Perry, his wife and staffers who flew to the Bahamas will be paid with political donations. But, considering who else was bending the governor's ear, that is small comfort for taxpayers concerned about special interest influence on state government — and taxpayers interested in seeing improvements in the funding and quality of Texas public schools.

Those in attendance included Grover Norquist, a Washington-based, anti-tax guru who believes it is a bigger sin to raise taxes than shut down schools or lay off teachers.

Also present was James Leininger, a wealthy San Antonio businessman and major Perry donor whose main interest in education is siphoning money from the public schools to pay for private school vouchers.

Another adviser on the island was Brooke Rollins, director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which also favors vouchers and is reluctant to see more money spent on public classrooms.

"There was progressive conversation made," Perry said.

But how many half-baked ideas?

Robison is chief of the Chronicle's Austin Bureau. E-mail him at clay.robison@chron.com.