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Let the sun shine on Texas

*Recording legislators'
votes is long in coming*

By MICHAEL QUINN SULLIVAN

Like all children, mine have gone through the inevitable stage of fearing the dark. Hard to blame them: the bumps, the obstacles, the unknown.

A child's fear of the dark is understandable. What's equally understandable is the average lawmaker's fear of the light. After all, revelations of bumps and stumbles over bad public policy can be a scary thing when pesky constituents come a' calling.

That's why darkness reigns supreme in our beloved state's legislative process.

Texas is one of only seven states that doesn't mandate at least one house record final vote on legislation, as the *Dallas Morning News* recently noted. Not exactly a chummy club we should remain in.

Regardless of ideological persuasion, the issue is easy to understand. No employer would allow her employees to hide the very measures by which she judges job performance; mine certainly doesn't.

Yet the only realistic measure Texas taxpayers have in determining the practical value of their

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representative or senator is hidden from view. With the current practice of allowing the great majority of bills to pass with unrecorded voice votes, lawmakers are all but unaccountable back home for their legislative work.

That should change. State Sen. John Carona and State Rep. Dan Branch have already filed legislation for the new session that would bring much-needed light to the voting records of lawmakers. Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst has put the concept high on his legislative agenda of making government more accessible to the public.

While folks have howled for years at the darkness shielding lawmakers from taxpayer and voter review, the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas – an organization composed primarily of journalists – reports 2005 could finally see sunshine in Austin. An amazing array of organizations from across the ideological spectrum, and at least 31 state lawmakers, are on record supporting more recorded legislative votes.

In an age of instant information, it is remarkable Texas lawmakers have received a free pass thus far staying out of the light.

That must change.

Some might argue that recording votes will make lawmakers hesitant to take controversial positions. That's the point. Just like the employee wondering if he will get caught sleeping on the job, lawmakers should worry about Ma and Pa Voter reacting negatively to poor public policy performance.

Texans deserve to know how their lawmakers vote. By bringing light to the legislative process, we will not only reveal perpetrators of bad policy but bring a higher level of accountability to Texas government.

When my kids awake in the night, they know dawn will come. Daybreak is long overdue for Texas taxpayers. Hopefully light will flood the Texas Capitol during the 2005 legislative session, no matter how scary it might be for politicians.



Michael Quinn Sullivan is the vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.