

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AGENCIES CONCERNED ABOUT RIGHT-TO-KNOW REQUEST CONTEST

The Right-to-Know Law request contest recently announced by the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association is contradictory to the spirit of the law and has the potential to cost taxpayers money as public officials must spend time and resources answering unnecessary inquiries, according to the Pennsylvania Local Government Conference.

The PA Open Records Challenge asks citizens to attempt to obtain a document, such as a school superintendent's contract or the amount of legal fees spent by their town in 2006, using an open records request. While such requests are permissible under the Right-to-Know Law, a large influx of such inquiries due to this contest could cause officials to delay performing other public business while attempting to appropriately answer requests under the law's response provisions.

"It is contradictory for an organization whose members frequently editorialize about wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars to encourage citizens to file frivolous Right-to-Know requests that will require public officials to spend valuable time and resources answering," said Thomas J. Gentzel, executive director of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. "The efforts used to respond to these requests are better spent on completing legitimate work on behalf of the citizens of the commonwealth.

"School boards are responsible local government entities who respect and support the public's right to know," Gentzel added. "Our members promote community engagement and seek the public's input in performing their duties and serving their residents."

"Local government officials across Pennsylvania support the public's right to know on many levels and do their best to respond to serious inquiries in a efficient and effective manner," said Douglas E. Hill, executive director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania. "It is unconscionable for an organization that claims to protect the people's interests to advocate clogging up public offices with busywork requests to satisfy a contest."

"By necessity, many school districts and local government offices operate with limited staffs, using personnel and resources to their fullest. Increasing workloads with needless Right-to-Know queries would create an undue hardship on many small local government agencies," said R. Keith Hite, executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. "We urge the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association to reconsider this contest and find some other method of increasing awareness about the need for revisions to the current law."

Local government agencies throughout Pennsylvania have long supported the public's right to know and will continue to work with the state legislature to update the current law. Right-to-Know requests always are addressed in a professional and competent manner, and these organizations will continue to honor the law.

The Pennsylvania Local Government Conference includes the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors, Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs, Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners and the Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Scott K. Shewell

Director of Public Relations

Pennsylvania School Boards Association

(717) 506-2450, ext. 3375