



Do the public's business in public

The Blaine County School District board of trustees has been driving a truck through a loophole in the Idaho Open Meeting Law.

The law allows public boards to tape a piece of paper announcing a special meeting to a couple of doors for 24 hours and call it public notice.

If local taxpayers had the level of psychic powers that exist only in science fiction, that might not be a problem. But for real people, it is. The law is laughable in a day and age when the Internet has made information instantaneous.

Since January, the board has posted notice of seven special meetings in this way. Not only did the board act as though it was doing business in the age of messaging by carrier pigeon, it failed to notify the press.

This is not a matter of the board's getting caught on a mere technicality, because it used the loophole to meet and consider serious issues.

It wasn't exactly housekeeping when the board heard a major presentation from a company seeking a \$15.1 million contract with the district for construction, management and engineering services for geothermal heating and cooling in area schools. The project will be funded by a plant facilities levy recently approved by voters.

Before and after the levy vote last fall, the district promised to keep the public well informed of how and where the money is spent. Hearing the nuts-and-bolts presentation in a virtually private session broke that promise.

In other posted-by-door meetings:

- The board decided to hire a former local principal as assistant school superintendent. Given that Paul Bates and Steve Guthrie, the board's two newest members elected last spring, had criticized the previous board for not involving the public in a decision to hire a new superintendent, the action was astonishing.
- The board reviewed options for next year's schools budget—\$92.8 million, the largest of any public budget in the county. Last year, a large public contingent attended a similar meeting that was well publicized.
- The board approved a new contract with the local teachers union.

To heap irony upon insult, while all of this was going on, a consulting company hired by the board was in the process of polling the public about how the board and the school district could improve communications. The price for the "communications report card" project is \$14,000.

Here's some free advice: Quit putting special meeting notices where no one will see them, publish them in the newspaper, put them on the district's website and refuse to hold any meeting in virtual secrecy.

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