

April: State senators exclude public from tax hearing

Written by By Richard Mial

Wisconsin's open meetings law is based on the idea that "a representative government of the American type is dependent upon an informed electorate."

But don't tell that to two prominent Republican state senators. They seem to think that it's better when the public isn't involved.

Republican Sens. Glenn Grothman of West Bend and Alberta Darling of River Hills held two invitation-only public hearings on a proposed constitutional amendment to limit spending by school districts and local governments.

Normally, such meetings are designed to get input from all citizens, but Grothman and Darling limited a March 29 meeting at the Germantown Village Hall to local government leaders only. An earlier session March 13 in Brown Deer was limited to only school officials. And Darling met privately last Friday with members of a parent-teacher group and the Milwaukee Jewish Council. Both meetings were held in the Milwaukee area.

There will be another hearing this week. It will be held at noon Wednesday at the state Capitol in Madison. Invitation-only testimony will be taken from noon to 4 p.m., while members of the public will have to wait until 5:30 p.m. to get their chance to speak.

While Darling told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that it was not the organizers' intent to exclude anyone, the fact that members of the public were not informed about the earlier hearings shows there was, in fact, an attempt to exclude ordinary people.

Grothman even said the March 29 hearing was better than one in which the public would have been invited.

"To be honest," he told the Journal Sentinel, "we learned a lot more from the invitation-only meeting."

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A few weeks ago in Janesville, I attended a session in which representatives from the Wisconsin Department of Justice explained the state's open meetings and open records laws to citizens and government officials. Wisconsin law allows legitimate exceptions to the open meetings law, such as sensitive personnel issues or strategy discussions about court cases. But local and state government officials all too often abuse the privilege.

Officials should want to involve citizens in the issues that are important to them. That's why the actions of state leaders like Grothman and Darling are so corrosive. When government officials blatantly exclude the public from meetings designed to get input about public policy, they only breed cynicism and distrust.

State open government laws were written to promote an informed electorate. We shouldn't allow today's legislators to make a mockery of those noble intentions.

Mial is opinion page editor of the La Crosse Tribune. Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council, a nonprofit group dedicated to open government.