



Op-Ed: Transparency gets cloudy

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It all too often is a struggle to apply the bright light of public scrutiny that is a tonic for the stealth that ails government in Washington, Lansing and all levels of local government.

Last week, two Michigan politicians trumpeted the need for transparency on the state and national fronts.

-- Attorney General Mike Cox toured both peninsulas last week (including Marquette, Sault Ste. Marie, Traverse City and Big Rapids) to push his call for Gov. Jennifer Granholm to follow the lead of 16 other states and the federal government that have "created a searchable Web site where citizens can keep track of their taxes and see how their dollars are being spent."

-- U.S. Rep. Dave Camp, R-Midland, ranking Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee and a member of the conference committee appointed to resolve House-Senate differences in the massive economic stimulus package, railed on the House floor Friday that most House members and "the American people were frozen" out of the process because of lack of transparency about details in the 1,100-page bill.

I always welcome talking to politicians who champion transparency, as I did last week by phone with Cox and Camp. Both of them played off what President Barack Obama has said about importance of transparency.

"Transparency breeds accountability and is very empowering (for citizens)," said Cox, who puts his department's spending online and has a drug cost Web site that at one point was averaging 160,000 hits a month. "It is the FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) of the 21st century."

(The Midland-based Mackinac Center gave deserved cheers last week to rookie state Reps. Tom McMillin, R-Rochester, and Justin Amash, R-Grand Rapids, for setting "an example for all of state government by putting the names and salaries of their legislative staff online ... the first state officials to be so publicly transparent regarding who is working for them and how much they make.")

Recalling that Obama as senator co-sponsored the federal transparency spending Web site to "achieve a very simple and powerful vision ... that rejects the idea that government actions and decisions should be kept secret," Cox called on Granholm in her budget last week to provide for such a single site. She did not.

(Granholm Press Secretary Liz Boyd said that in a budget that slashes \$670 million from current programs, the state still provides a wide range of online information and there was no room for the "millions" it would cost for converting the current system to the kind that Cox seeks. Subsequently, the administration did not provide promised cost specifics in time for this column.

If, in fact, the system that Cox seeks would cost "millions" to install, I can see why Granholm did not include it in last week's tight budget.

There's no disputing Rep. Camp's complaint about lack of transparency in the stimulus package. As one of five House members on the conference committee, he said he walked past a press conference held by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid "announcing a final deal had been struck by senators, and only by senators. This is the first conference (committee) I have ever been on where the press conference announcing the results happened before the actual meeting."

The most valid of Camp's points was lack of transparency -- lack of openness in what was in the bill before the vote. However, given the rush for decision on this biggest spending bill in U.S. history, the transparency problem is not so much that the public did not have access to what was in it but that their elected representatives did not have time to read the huge bill they voted on.

Camp said that the stimulus package writing was "a stunning reversal of a campaign pledge to end the practice of writing legislation behind closed doors" that as of late last week was still on an Obama Web site: www.change.gov/agenda/ethics_agenda.

Camp cited this Obama pledge:

"As president, Barack Obama will restore the American people's trust in their government by making government more open and transparent. Obama will work to reform congressional rules to require all legislative sessions, including committee mark-ups and conference committees, to be conducted in public. By making these practices public, the American people will be able to hold their leaders accountable for wasteful spending and lawmakers won't be able to slip favors for lobbyists into bills at the last minute."

Camp correctly said the process "has been anything but public. It is backtracking on a campaign pledge. ... When you write legislation in secret you get bad laws."

Bad also are decisions made in secret by county commissions, township boards, city councils and other local bodies.

"Government more open and transparent." It's a presidential vow that should be kept -- and trickle down to local governments.

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