

# THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

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## Open Meetings Law Improvements Welcome

"...and now we'll be going into executive session to discuss legal and personnel matters." It's not a familiar phrase to everyone, but if you're a reporter or a local government watchdog, you've heard it plenty and know what it really means.

Executive session—a closed or secret portion of a meeting—is the favorite hiding place of public officials who need a legal way to avoid doing business in full view of the people. Such sessions usually take place at the end of the official agenda, when constituents and even reporters are more likely to bail out than wait it out. In the smallest towns that can mean council stays in chambers while the audience waits outside in the dark—literally as well figuratively.

It looks as if the hiding place is going to get a lot narrower. The state House and Senate, at the urging of the N.C. Press Association, are considering their most extensive rewrite ever of the state Open Meetings Law. These are just a few of the improvements awaiting final House and Senate approval:

- Appointed bodies are public bodies. This wasn't clear under current law.

- The term "executive session" is replaced by "closed session."

- Minutes are required for closed sessions.
- Public bodies may not meet in closed session to discuss the competence, character, fitness, appointment performance, removal or replacement of one of its own members.

- Attorney-client privilege will be narrower. The new law says that just because an attorney is present doesn't allow the public body to claim an exemption from the Open Meetings Law.

- Public bodies must cite the specific statutory authority when making a motion to go into closed session. This means that public bodies must know the Open Meetings Law a little better. They can't just make the usual nebulous motion: "We're going into closed session to talk about personnel or legal matters."

These are substantial improvements which will serve not just the press but everyone who disdains subterfuge and believes public officials should be subject to the most stringent standards of accountability.

## Is Public Relations What The Schools Really Need?

One of the solutions proposed for addressing the often negative perceptions of the school system revealed in a recent survey by the Southport-Oak Island Chamber of Commerce is hiring a "good public relations person" for the schools.

Hiring someone to promote a favorable relationship with the public might help in calling attention to the good things that happen every day in the schools and are taken for granted because good things are supposed to happen in schools. A good public relations officer can even help turn around attitudes within an organization. But I tend to believe this is another example of throwing money at a problem.

Also, I'm not convinced this is the best way to use the school system's limited resources. I think it can be spent better in other ways and there's also a good chance that person's effectiveness would be undermined or negated by others in the school system.

Reputations, good and bad, are earned, at least in part. Ask the folks at Carolina Power & Light Co. Perceptions, however faulty, are based on at least a kernel or two of reality. Even the best, most expensive public relations person can only do so much "damage control."

It would be far better if the schools follow CP&L's suit and committed itself to fixing "root causes," to borrow a phrase from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, instead of diverting attention from problems or jerry-rigging what the nuclear industry calls work-arounds—that's when you expend time and energy on makeshift substitutes instead of taking time to fix something.

Some overhauls require big bucks, but for others all that's required is a change of attitude.

The survey noted that 66 percent of the respondents receive some of their information about the schools from newspapers and 42 percent, from radio and TV. But they rely to a much greater degree on word-of-mouth sources: 81.4 percent on students; 70 percent, parents; and 52.6 percent, other adults.

Have you ever thought about how much damage to a school's or school system's reputation one sorry teacher can do? One inept administrator? A school board that can't reach a consensus on important issues or undercuts its own administration? Or what may be the ultimate weapon—one angry or frustrated parent?

It's extremely important that the school system respond quickly and responsibly to any concern brought to its attention by a customer—any parent, student or other citizen, from the points of view of both education and public relations.

Public relations must be every person's responsibility. This is something all of us who deal with people on a day to day basis need to remember.

I have as much trouble being consistently responsive as the next person. Catch me on a bad day or in a hectic moment, and the first impression that's created could be one I would rather not have made. It may not be entirely accurate, but it will travel with me, and the company I work for, for a long time. Same goes for the school system. Remember the story of the blindfolded men and the elephant?

This idea of responsiveness doesn't mean a school official has to automatically agree that the aggrieved party is right about something, but then it shouldn't launch an automatic barrage in self-defense of the school system either.

It does mean that that school person should listen and listen well. The concerned party ideally should come away from the encounter with a sense that what he or she had to say mattered, that it was heard and understood, and that it will be looked into objectively and responded to appropriately. And they shouldn't have to wait long for an answer, whether or not it's what they wanted to hear. And if a problem exists that can be fixed, it should be fixed.

Susan Usher



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

# Grandmother Protests Officer's Behavior

To the editor:  
 My 18-year-old grandson recently received a speeding ticket while visiting on Holden Beach. It was his first traffic violation and, of course, it very upsetting, spoiling a pleasant graduation celebration at the beach.

This young man has been coming to Holden Beach since he was a baby. He does not smoke, drink or use drugs. He is an honor student and plans to attend Duke University in the fall. He is not a problem teenager.

He readily admitted that he made a mistake and deserved the ticket. However, he stated that the policeman who charged him was very rude and arrogant and that he used angry profanity.

I feel very strongly that our public servants should set a better example for our young people. We want them to respect, rather than dislike, the law enforcement agents.

As a homeowner and taxpayer on Holden Beach for nearly 20 years, I would like to suggest that the Town of Holden Beach offer a course in public relations or search for more capable and dignified police officers.

Sybil Anderson  
 Cary

### Bravo, Congrats

To the editor:  
 Bravo and congratulations to Eric Carlson for his column of June 16. It is high time that we the citizens band together and attempt to put a

stop to the government's interference in our private lives.

I plan to continue to ride my bicycle "sans" helmet. It is my privilege.

F.G. Foster  
 Holden Beach

### Celebrity Worship

To the editor:  
 Many of the idols of today's society are cast in bronze and carved of stone and, as in the days of yore, their feet are made of clay and easily toppled by their own foibles.

The tragedy of O.J. Simpson is a moot point. The celebrity worship of our younger generation, if directed to their parents, teachers and pastors instead of athletes, rock stars and movie stars, would enable them to adhere more closely to moral principles and lead a worthwhile and fulfilling life.

John F. Ziefel  
 Sunset Beach

### One Hot Dog

To the editor:  
 A couple of Sundays ago I went to Briarcliff Mall....On my way to the entrance I heard a little dog crying. I thought surely no one left a dog in a car in this heat. Folks, it was hot, hot that day.

I searched the parking area until I found him. There was the most beautiful little black dog I had ever seen. He was on the front floor board trying to get in a shaded area. He was crying and panting something awful. The window was down

just enough to get my finger in. He got on the seat and licked my finger.

I tried so hard to get him some help. I waited and prayed that his owner would hurry out.

I would like for (the owner) to put on a fur coat, get in a car on a hot day with the windows down half an inch and sit there for just a few minutes and suffer just like your beautiful animal did.

I had to wait in my car the other day for about 30 minutes on a hot day, but I had all my windows down. I just don't want to think about what that beautiful little animal must have suffered.

I used to have a dog that loved to ride also, but I never took her with me to a place that she could not go in.

Please leave your precious animal at home next time you go shopping.

Mary Grissett  
 Shallotte

### Rude To Grads

To the editor:  
 The West Brunswick High School graduation was the worst I have ever attended. I could not believe how rude the audience was. As each student's name was announced, the families and friends of the student who had just received their diploma got up and began leaving their seats in the bleachers, causing a constant stream of people going down the bleachers.

It sounded like a herd of cattle. It was almost impossible to hear the

next student's name. There was absolutely no respect for the graduates. I'm sure there were other guests there that could not believe how inconsiderate this was to the students who had not received their diplomas.

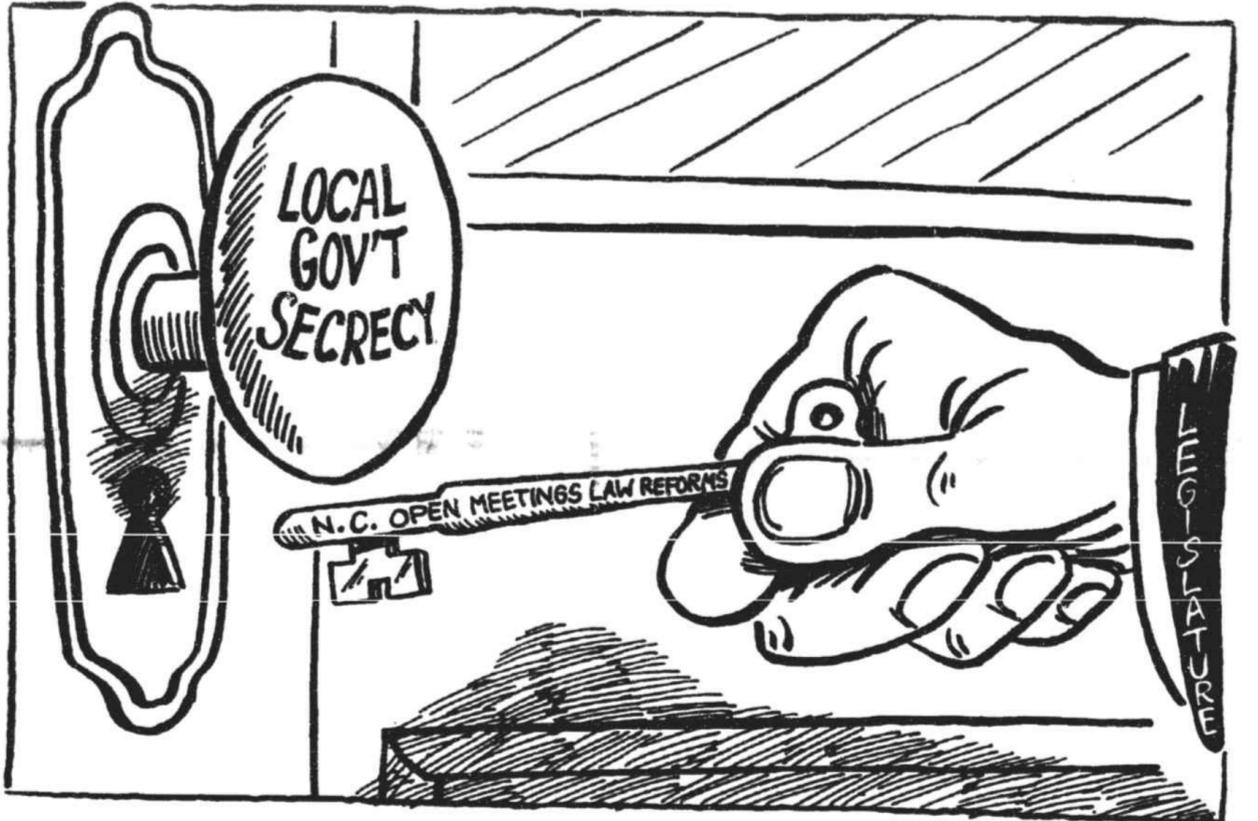
It is occasions such as this that get the southern region known as red-necks. Being a native of this area, I am very embarrassed that the students were much better behaved than the audience. I sincerely hope that in future years the students will instruct the audience to show the same respect for the last graduate as they did for the first.

I suggest that on such occasions where large groups of people are gathered, the audience remain in their seats until the graduating class has exited the field.

Vanetta Teal  
 Mint Hill

### Write Us

We welcome your letters to the editor. Letters must include your address and telephone number. (This information is for verification purposes only; we will not publish your street/mailling address or phone number.) Letters must be typed or written legibly. Address letters to: The Brunswick Beacon, P.O. Box 2558, Shallotte NC 28459. Anonymous letters will not be published.



## Court Fight Should Be Welcomed, Not Feared

The die is cast.  
 —Julius Caesar, as he marched his army across the Rubicon River to seize power over the Roman Empire.

Let's do it.  
 —Condemned murderer Gary Gilmore, moments before his execution in a Utah electric chair.

Somebody else once said, "Be careful what you wish for. You might get it."

All of which reminds me of the ongoing conflict over school funding that seems to be headed for a legal battle between the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners and the Brunswick County Board of Education.

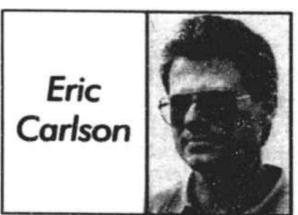
For the second time in as many years, the school board has submitted a budget request that seeks spending levels far above what the commissioners feel inclined to approve. This time the chasm between them measures about \$4 million.

Last summer, the two boards stood their ground during the preliminary stages of a process that could have led to the funding question being decided in civil superior court. Just short of that final solution, both sides blinked and agreed to accept a mediated settlement in which the county paid the schools another half million dollars.

Politics has altered the complexion of this year's fight. All ten seats on the two boards are up for grabs in the coming election.

All five commissioners survived the primaries. Like high-school graduates with brand new convertibles, they are confidently cruising toward November with their tops down, enjoying the ride and hoping to run on a record of not raising taxes.

In contrast, the school board is multi-car pile-up. One member pulled out of the race to protest



Eric Carlson

sides sniping at each other and lobbying charges and countercharges back and forth between Bolivia and Southport.

The voters are left scratching their heads and wondering who's right, while another class of academically undernourished young graduates ventures out into the real world.

Now there's talk of paying the state to audit school spending, which will merely give both sides another batch of figures to argue about.

The people of this county deserve more. They deserve an understandable public accounting of how their tax money is spent on education and why that spending is not producing desirable results.

So let's forget the audit and go to court. Let each side make its best case in plain language that a dozen taxpaying Brunswick Countians can understand. Let the jury of 12 listen to all the evidence and decide how much of their (and our) tax money should be invested in the next generation.

This would forever change the budget dialog between the commissioners and the school board.

Instead of the annual dog-and-pony show of school officials blaming all education woes on deficient funding, there would be a transcript of sworn testimony from teachers and principals explaining their needs and their vision of what education is and could be in this county.

Instead of the traditional bloated-administration accusations by the commissioners, we would all get a full accounting of every job description in the school offices, with the organizational structure charted so that everyone could decide for themselves where the waste and needs are.

Who knows what might happen? The jury could determine that our school system cannot do its job

without several new buildings, tons of educational materials, higher salaries for teachers and a major reduction in class sizes.

Those 12 regular folks could decide the needs are so great that the county should pay the school system another \$10 million immediately, even though it would add a nickel to their tax rate.

Or the jury could review all the evidence and say that the schools have plenty of money, but they aren't spending it in the right places. They could recommend eliminating positions in the school administrative offices and suggest strict performance standards for all teachers.

Their recommendations might not be legally binding, but no elected board member who wanted to stay in office would dare vote for a budget that didn't incorporate those findings.

It's time to stop this annual spitting contest between the county and the schools. Let's put the question before 12 randomly selected citizens who have been questioned by lawyers on both sides to determine their objectivity. Let them hear the evidence and decide.

If they say we need a tax increase to improve education, we will just have to pay it. If the schools are told to make changes, they will simply have to adjust. There won't be anyone to blame in November.

Bureaucracies—such as county governments and school systems—are like giant marshmallows. No matter how hard you push on one side, they just bulge out on the other. No matter how much of a dent you make, the surface comes right back when the pressure is taken off.

To really find out what's at the core of a marshmallow, you need to stick it into a fire, burn off the sugar coating and take a good look inside. Let's do it.