Yakima Valley BUSINESS TIMES

OPINION

June 27 - July 11, 2014

Lift Shroud Of Secrecy From Employment Contract Talks

By Jason Mercier

Imagine that the governor is holding a series of secret closed-door negotiations with a company that could result in hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer expenses. Now imagine that the same company secretly meeting with the governor is also a campaign contributor. Also imagine that the Legislature is barred from changing the details of an agreement negotiated in secret with the governor and can only vote up or down on funding the final proposal.

Sounds outrageous?

You bet! Yet that is exactly what happens each time state and local officials in Washington negotiate pay and benefits with public-employee unions. It doesn't have to be this way.

Several states ensure that the public is not shut out of the collective-bargaining process with government unions. Some states open the entire negotiation process to the public, while others include an exemption when government officials are strategizing among themselves. Once public officials meet with union negotiators, however, the public is allowed to monitor the process.

This is exactly what occurs in Florida. As that state's Attorney General explains, "The Legislature has, therefore, divided Sunshine Law policy on collective bargaining for public employees into two parts: When the public employer is meeting with its own side, it is exempt from the Sunshine Law; when the public employer is meeting with the other side, it is required to comply with the Sunshine Law."

State and local employment contracts should not be negotiated in secret. The public provides the money for these agreements. We should be allowed to follow the process and hold government officials accountable for the spending decisions they make on our behalf. Open meetings would identify whether one side is being unreasonable, and would quickly reveal who is acting in bad faith.

The state Senate considered a bill this year to address this problem, but ultimately did not hold a floor vote on SB 6183 (which would require public-employee collective-bargaining sessions to be open meetings). Among those in favor of this reform is the nonpartisan Washington Coalition for Open Government.

A broader conversation should occur about how the relatively new state collective-bargaining process, which took effect in 2005, is working. But even if mandatory government collective bargaining is retained, at a minimum we should end the shroud of secrecy that surrounds the current negotiations.

It is doubtful the citizens of our state meant everything except contract negotiations with government unions

should be subject to the open meetings law they enacted by initiative. They declared, "The people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created."

Being kept in the dark makes fulfilling this open-government intent next to impossible.

State government employee union officials are scheduled to meet again with the governor's team on June 24 in a closed conference room in Olympia. Public access to that meeting is forbidden. But, for future meetings, lawmakers should take the "keep out" sign off the door and let the taxpayers, who must foot the bill for any deal, into the room.