

# The Snohomish Times

## Secret union contract negotiations

BY JASON MERCIER

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Tomorrow the Governor's Office will continue secret contract negotiations with state employee unions focused on compensation related issues for the 2015-17 budget. Not only is the public and media not allowed to monitor these conversations but the legislative committee created in the same law that authorized closed door contract negotiations still hasn't been consulted as required by law. This lack of legislative consultation isn't new, however, as the committee the Governor is charged to consult with has never met since the law went into effect in 2002.

According to the bill report for HB 1268 (2002 law that created closed door negotiations): "When negotiating collective bargaining agreements, the Governor must consult with the new Joint Select Committee on Employee Relations."

From Sec. 302 (5) of HB 1268 (2002) concerning the Joint Select Committee on Employee Relations:

"... The governor shall periodically consult with the committee regarding appropriations necessary to implement the compensation and fringe benefit provisions in the master collective bargaining agreements, and upon completion of negotiations, advise the committee on the elements of the agreements and on any legislation necessary to implement the agreements."

Here is the current roster of the Joint Select Committee on Employment Relations (JCER), along with the appointment dates for each member:

- Rep. Bruce Chandler - 01/15/2014
- Rep. Ross Hunter - 01/10/2011
- Rep. Dan Kristiansen - 01/15/2014
- Rep. Pat Sullivan - 09/07/2012
- Sen. Karen Fraser - 09/24/2012
- Sen. Jim Hargrove - 02/18/2013
- Sen. Andy Hill - 01/24/2013
- Sen. Jim Honeyford - 06/29/2004

According to Sen. Honeyford, the longest serving member of the committee (since 2004), he has never been consulted by a Governor during the secret contract negotiations.

Sen. Honeyford told me: "I believe that labor negotiations should be transparent and one part of that transparency should be the consultation with the legislative committee as required by law."

Based on his frustration it should be no surprise that Sen. Honeyford is a co-sponsor of SB 6183: Requiring public employee collective bargaining sessions to be open meetings.

The need for transparency also exists at the local level as demonstrated by citizens in the City of Sequim filing an initiative to make local union contract negotiations open to the public.

As reported by the Peninsula Daily News:

“Proposition 1 would make collective bargaining negotiations between the city and unions public, while Proposition 2 would give employees the choice as to whether they join those unions. Shottthafer said public negotiations with the unions would give taxpayers an open chance to see what issues the two sides are negotiating . . .

But city officials say those negotiations, now held behind closed doors under a state exemption from the Open Public Meetings Act, are often too volatile to do in the public eye.

‘I would compare it to doing marriage counseling in public,’ City Manager Steve Burkett said.”

Let the “marriage counseling” between taxpayers and government begin. One good way to restore trust is to open the doors to these important negotiations being made on our behalf.

As for tomorrow’s secret contract negotiations, the Freedom Foundation is hoping the Governor and state unions will see the light and let the public monitor the process. To encourage this they are putting together a “Public Money, Public Meetings” get together of citizens between 8-9:30 a.m. at the Tivoli Fountain on the east side of the Washington State Capitol Campus.

According to Maxford Nelsen, Labor Policy Analyst for the Freedom Foundation:

“The protest will feature signs, street theater and speakers. The protest will culminate with a march to the site of the closed-door negotiations at the Washington State Labor Council. When it comes to collective bargaining for government unions, transparency cuts both ways. Sometimes unions will benefit from greater openness and sometimes management will benefit. But the real winners are union members and the taxpaying public who no longer have to guess what’s going on behind closed doors.”

State/local employment contracts should not be negotiated in secret. Taxpayers are ultimately responsible for funding these agreements. They should be allowed to monitor the negotiation process and to hold government officials accountable for their actions. Open meetings will also quickly identify if one side is being unreasonable in negotiations to help the public determine who is acting in good or bad faith.

While in the short term these negotiations should be opened up to the public, ultimately they should be limited to non-economic issues. Anything requiring an appropriation should be part of the normal public budget process in the legislature and not be a take it or leave it (which likely never will happen due to time constraints on budget and need for re-opening negotiations late in session) proposition for lawmakers buried in the back of the budget.