

Give public access to Statehouse floor

Sunday, February 15, 2009

By: Bob Ingle

Assemblyman Jon Bramnick, R-Union, is catching flak from fellow lawmakers because he had the audacity to think regular folks should have an opportunity to talk to legislators from the floor of the Legislature.

Next thing you know Bramnick will be asking that taxpayers have the same direct access to lawmakers as well-heeled lobbyists do.

Bramnick introduced a bill to require the Assembly and Senate to set aside specific times to listen to the public, which, as he points out, is not all that unusual at the local level, even in New Jersey.

"As a former Plainfield councilman, I recall quite vividly how citizens would take the microphone on a weekly basis. They would ask questions and request answers to issues facing their city and their neighborhood," he said.

Under current rules, public comment is permitted only during committee meetings, and then it is restricted to items on the agenda. That's how lawmakers control things. Under Bramnick's proposal, the public could bring up any issue it wants. Each house would set time limits, but Bramnick thinks it should happen at least four times a year.

That's too conservative. It should be every time the Legislature meets. Heck, they should have sessions specifically to allow the public to talk directly to lawmakers. Call it "Little People's Day" to further boost the lawmakers' enormous egos.

A public speaking period would not take away value work time for legislators. Each session usually has some tribute to this thing or another that eats up plenty of time.

Start here: One thing taxpayers might want to ask Assemblyman Herb Conaway, D-Burlington, is why he rushed through a bill to require fluoridation in all of New Jersey's public water supplies when there are so many unanswered questions. The hearing before Conaway's Assembly Health Committee came just two business days after the bill was introduced.

No question fluoride helps prevent dental cavities. But there are concerns we may be getting too much of it. Besides toothpaste, mouthwash and municipal water supplies that have it, fluoride also comes to us in soft drinks, fast food, cereal and all manner of items you wouldn't make a connection to.

There also is an environmental issue:

"When the public thinks of fluoridation, they think of the kind used in toothpaste (sodium fluoride). But, when people find out that the type of fluoride they are dumping in our drinking

water is an industrial waste product that actually contains harmful heavy metals, their support falters," said Sharon Finlayson, board chair of the New Jersey Environmental Federation.

The NJEF says hydrofluosilicic acid, most often used to fluoride water, is a byproduct of the phosphate fertilizer industry and is contaminated by stuff like arsenic, mercury and lead.

In 2005, the state Public Health Council attempted to mandate fluoridation, but Gov. Dick Codey's administration stripped it of its rule-making authority because it didn't adequately address fluoride concerns. Conaway didn't get the message.

What explains the big rush around this bill authored by him and Assemblyman Lou "The Empty Suit" Greenwald, D-Camden? Maybe they want campaign contributions from the dental lobby.

Mailbag: Kathy asks why Gov. Corzine can't be more like the governor of Delaware, who met with school administrators and superintendents and told them to start sharing services and give up their state cars. (For that matter, why can't we have lower taxes like Delaware, too?)

About Sen. Scutari's idea to save money by giving legislators longer terms, Grace wrote suggesting they have just one Assembly member from each district instead of two. She also thinks the money spent on lawyers in the Mount Laurel affordable housing lawsuits could have built many affordable homes.

Bob Ingle is Trenton bureau chief for Gannett New Jersey newspapers. He can be reached via e-mail at bobingle@app.com and heard on New Jersey 101.5 FM radio at 5 p.m. Fridays. Join his blog at www.app.com/state.

Section: OPINION

Copyright (c) Home News Tribune. All rights reserved.