

Presentation to the Commission on Open Government

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My name is Jere Moore. I'm retired and live in Tallahassee. I have been on all sides of the open-government issue, as a reporter for The Associated Press and The Florida Times-Union and as a state employee in the Governor's Office, Department of Administration that is now defunct, and the Department of Revenue that will never be defunct. Pat Gleason's presentation Wednesday reminded me that I wrote The Associated Press article on the Supreme Court decision applying Open Government to advisory bodies of decision makers. On a historic note, I would like to recognize another hero in Open Government, the late Supreme Court Justice James Atkins. He provided the leadership for the sometimes-reluctant court to give the broadest possible interpretation to the Sunshine Law.

Back to my point, this Commission has an opportunity to take advantage of 21st Century technology and make Florida the world's leader in transparent government. The technology is right and the state leadership is right. The Commission could recommend that all communications within Florida government and especially between government and the public be posted on the Internet daily for all the world, particularly Florida taxpayers and news reporters, to see.

In addition to opening government, the posting requirement probably would make for a more efficient and honest government. Managers would have to consider, "What will they (the generic They) think when they see what I have done." It will reduce the cynicism about government that is growing rapidly. And it will send a strong message to those employees who Pat cited as thinking the records belong to them and not the public. It also might help senior managers. Bob Butterworth, former attorney general who is now secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families and a member of the Commission, or someone in his office could know when a complaint about a child's safety gets brushed off by a social worker.

The idea is the new-technology version of a proposal from the late Martin Waldron, who was a New York Times correspondent in Tallahassee 40 years ago. I also presented the Waldron plan to the 1978 Constitution Revision Commission chaired by Sandy D' Alemberte, also a member of this Commission. Neither Waldron nor I had success with implementing the idea, although Waldron got some attention when he went into a Capitol office and started examining mail that was on a desk. The failure of others to throw open the doors of government is not a reason for this Commission to turn its back on a good idea.

Waldron proposed that copies be made of all incoming and outgoing mail in the governor's office and be put daily in notebooks in the governor's office lobby.

New technology would allow all state agencies to post daily all mail, coming and going, on web pages without the time and expense of making copies. It would be an easy chore. Outgoing letters would already be on computers and letters received could be scanned in. The recent misstep by Governor Crist's office of making public a report by all agencies of contacts by news media representatives, questions asked and answers given, shows that the agencies also could report on the Internet all telephone and direct contacts from the public, complaints made or questions asked, along with answers given by state employees.

Some exemptions would be required, for example, taxpayers discussing business issues or families reporting private matters, but they should be minimal.

The goal would be to show taxpayers how their money is being spent and government operated; to show how government employees are interacting with people outside government, from lobbyists to little old ladies to salesmen.

Of course, the biggest users would be capital reporters who could work out a plan to examine all communications daily.

I know this is a big, unusual, many faceted proposal but I hope you will consider it seriously. It is not necessary to do it all at once. Governor Crist could start by telling his office's staff to post all incoming and outgoing mail; then the Governor's Office could work to e-mail; then Governor Crist could direct the Division of Purchasing and Department of Transportation to post their correspondence. It could work forward from there. Legislation would be required to assure that the system lasts beyond this governor's administration.

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