

Updated at 5:49 p.m., Thursday, February 25, 2010

The bills your legislator probably hates

So you want government to be more open with more iron-clad ethics rules? Too bad. Your lawmakers aren't interested.

Of the 58 bills listed under the Legislature's "good government" and "ethics" packages, virtually none of them appear to have gained any traction. And with the deadlines fast approaching to finish hearings on bills and move them along, it's a long shot that any of them will make it.

Lawmakers appear loathe to consider reasonable measures that would shine a brighter light on how they conduct the public's business. For that arrogance alone they should be held accountable in the fall elections.

This lack of willingness to make ethics a priority is all the more shameful since there seems to be plenty of time to waste on flagpoles, foie gras and casino gambling.

But if you'd like your legislator to disclose his or her 2009 financial interests when the information could be useful — such as before the bills they voted on "cross over" to the opposite chamber — forget about it. Senate Bill 653 is stuck in the Judiciary and Government Operations committee.

Or if you'd like lobbyists to report campaign contributions on their expenditure statements — making it easier for you to track them — read SB 2870 or House Bill 2955 and hope for next year. They're trapped in their respective judiciary committees, too.

And do you think candidates for all-mail elections should file campaign spending reports so you can look at them before you cast your ballot? Then consider SB 2321; just remember that your legislator probably won't.

Even good-faith efforts to reform campaign finance laws have been prone to legislative mischief. Early versions of HB 2003 would have allowed any and all contractors doing business with the government to donate to political candidates. It took last-minute amendments to shrink this giant ethical loophole: Now only those with contracts of \$50,000 or less can donate. Apparently, a total ban on such obvious influence-peddling was too much to stomach.

Even so, HB 2003 itself is a necessary vehicle to clarify 37 years of haphazardly accumulated statutes. It's well on its way to passage, and that's a good thing.

It's just unfortunate that this year, modest progress is the best we can hope for. Perhaps — through the power of the ballot box — we can get better results next session.

