

TESTIMONY OF STEVEN M. PAPPAS, editor of The Times Argus  
Given March 25, 2015 before the Senate Government Operations Committee

Thank you for allowing me this time this afternoon.

In my nearly 30 years as a journalist, working for publications across New England, I have seen significant changes to the newspaper industry. Most of those changes have made things easier when it comes to news gathering and publishing. We have a wider, even global audience; we are more of a news organization today than a newspaper.

Changes in technology also have given us access to significant amounts of public information. That easy access has transformed us citizens. Anyone with an Internet connection, and a will to mine for facts and data, can get the answers they want or need. What technology has truly done is make people more engaged. That is wonderful.

Knowledge is power. When it comes to making educated decisions every day, we all turn to the stream of data available nearly everywhere we go. We carry the world in our pockets.

Fundamentally, we have to trust one another to make the best choices. That trust is based on working with credible, valid information. We expect the Fourth Estate, our media, to provide those relevant facts. And the media expects that the information it collects comes from viable sources. Government at all levels is a clearinghouse for much of that information. For that reason alone, all government should err on the side of transparency. That's where trust begins.

The Open Meeting Law is designed to provide adequate information for the public. Our laws on meetings and records are for the benefit of the public — not the government.

National security is a term that we hear but we do not necessarily feel it affects us personally; tax abatements do; when and where our kids play sports do; dog licenses do; our public safety does. Much of that municipal work that does matter to us is done by subcommittees. All of us in this room today know that committee work is where the meaningful discussions and debates are convened. It is where issues are best vetted.

S. 114 *willfully* delays access to these important decision-making bodies; and it strips away the valuable provision of imposing a fine – truly the only way a member of the public or representative of the media can call out our local officials for not abiding by the law.

Ultimately, ladies and gentlemen, S.114 further erodes the public's slipping trust in government. It further creates opportunities for potentially private discussions of public bodies, and it ignores a process that works well at every other level of governing. Proposals like this defy the spirit of the Open Meeting Law and *willingly* and *knowingly* deny certain members of the public the access they deserve.

For any group or person to suggest that subcommittee work is more labor-intensive or cumbersome than the obligations of higher-tiered town and city boards is simply ridiculous. It's an excuse to condone laziness.

Local government has the obligation to communicate with the public. Typing up and posting minutes is the least of any committee's work, but is an important step in the process of governing.

Transparency may not be what everyone wants, but as we have seen at every level of government — from the Obama administration to the Shumlin administration down to town subcommittee — it is precisely what we need.

Representing the eyes and ears of the public on behalf of The Times Argus and the Rutland Herald, and as a member of both the Vermont Press Association and the New England Newspaper Press Association, I urge you, as public officials: Don't be the ones who decide that the public doesn't have a right to know what's going on in their communities. It's a slippery, slippery slope from there.

Let the system work as it was intended, openly.

Thank you.