

COUNCIL MEETING NO PLACE FOR SECRETS

PATRICK HENRY ONCE SAID THAT LIBERTY IS NEVER SECURE AS LONG AS GOVERNMENT DOES BUSINESS IN SECRET.

Liberty Sentinel (May 18, 2007)

(Iola Register-Editorial by Susan Lynn) A misunderstanding occurred about what the Register can use as news Monday night at the Humboldt City Council meeting.

The context was information Terry Butts wanted to share with council members. Butts is an organizer with Humboldt's annual Biblesta.

The problem arose when Butts wanted her information to be kept secret from the attending media.

No can do, Register reporter Bruce Symes told Butts. What is shared at a public meeting is fair game for the press.

In an effort to circumvent the Kansas Open Meetings Act, Butts wrote the name of the entertainment on a slip of paper which was passed around the table.

The cat was out of the bag, as every Humboldt councilman knew. Communication, in any form in a public meeting, is public information.

For further proof that Larry Gatlin and the Gatlin Brothers will perform in Humboldt next fall, Symes contacted their booking agency in Tennessee to confirm the engagement. Not only did he receive a verbal confirmation, but the Oct. 6 date is posted on the agency's Web site, www.bobbyroberts.com.

"You bet!" a representative of the agency said when asked if the Gatlins were to perform in Humboldt. "Get the word out!"

So we did.

Butts called later that day irate that we had printed the news.

Not only had we put the contract in jeopardy by printing the news before she had received official confirmation, she said, but it was news she was wanting to save for Humboldt's own paper the Union.

Butts' opinion of the Open Meetings Act is that "it stinks."

She's not the first to have that sentiment. Publicly held meetings are a bane to elected officials. They must choose their words carefully, hold their feelings close to the vest and make sure they don't spill any information prematurely. For every expenditure they must make sure all parties have a fair chance at bidding. No favorites allowed. In short, it's a pain to have the press around.

THE REGISTER is comfortable being unwanted. Without the media, the public would be in the dark about governmental machinations. We have the responsibility to be the eyes and ears of the public at public meetings. Those include boards of education, city and county commissions and councils.

The news not open to us is that held in executive session. Typically those are allowed when discussions pertain to non-elected personnel matters, those considered privileged in an attorney-client relationship or in matters dealing with the purchase of property.

The Register has reported Humboldt news for the past 100-plus years. Humboldt was my hometown for the first few years of my life. The Union was the first paper my parents, Emerson and Mickey Lynn, owned 50 years ago. It's a relationship we have held dear. When Stewart Braden revived the Union in February after a one-year hiatus in its publication, we were delighted.

Several Register staff have Humboldt roots. Three still call it home. Iolans will be a strong contingent at Biblesta.

While we understand Humboldt's delight at regaining its weekly publication, we hope Humboldt leaders remain aware of the countywide interest in its 150th celebration and what a big draw the Gatlin performance will be at Biblesta.

In defense of Butts, she felt her news was of immediate significance because of the need for adequate planning for what will surely be a sizeable crowd for a popular country musical performance. Saying just that, apparently was not enough.

The excitement of securing such talent was difficult to keep a lid on.

But when told at a public meeting, it's public.

Unfortunately, events do occur in Kansas that our Founding Fathers would deem unacceptable. So, from time to time, you will be receiving "The Liberty Sentinel," an article about open government that may be of interest to you. If you have questions regarding the following information, please contact the contributing newspaper or Kansas Press Association at

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