

OPEN MEETINGS LESSON NEEDED

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

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(The Topeka Capital-Journal editorial) -- Lawrence city commissioners have discovered breaking the state's open meetings law comes with a price.

For the commissioners, conducting business behind closed doors will mean an extra session of night school, a two-hour refresher course Tuesday on compliance with the Kansas Open Meetings Act.

For Lawrence, the closed-door meeting comes with a higher toll, the loss of a business expansion that might have added as many as 150 jobs to the city's economy.

That's the bad news. The good news is that the training session, negotiated by the Kansas attorney general's office, is open to anyone.

You know, like council members and commissioners from nearby cities.

Like, say, Topeka, where the city council is under investigation by the Shawnee County district attorney for possibly violating the open meetings act.

The subject is touchy. Governing bodies often mistakenly think they have a right to conduct business in private whenever they choose. They do have that right -- on a very small number of subjects, such as personnel matters.

Too often, though, they close the door at a whim.

The penalty, as the Lawrence commissioners learned, might not be particularly painful. But it's an embarrassing slap on the wrist.

The Lawrence commission got into trouble when it went into closed-door executive session to consider economic development incentives for a pharmaceutical company.

The plan backfired. After news emerged about the open meetings violation, the pharmaceutical company announced it was no longer going to accept the incentives package.

And then the kicker -- the company announced it had scuttled its plans to expand in Lawrence.

As part of their arrangement with the attorney general's office and to avoid prosecution, the commissioners agreed to attend the training course.

We'd like to see the room at Lawrence City Hall filled next Tuesday, and we'd be tickled if Topeka council members were among the crowd, which is expected to include Douglas County commissioners and Lawrence school board members.

University of Kansas professor Mike Kautsch will lead the two-hour session.

Oh, by the way, the meeting is open to the public.

***Do you have an Open Government experience to share? E-mail it to
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