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Guest commentary: Let the sun shine on Collier County government

Chris Straton - President, League of Women Voters of Collier County

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The League of Women Voters is committed to openness in government. We were dismayed to see the openness of Collier County Commission proceedings compromised not once, but twice in the last month when votes were taken that had not been specifically advertised as part of the agendas.

On Jan. 24, at the end of a two-day County Commission meeting, Commissioner Tom Henning proposed that the county kill a proposed "linkage fee" that would have been assessed on new commercial construction to fund affordable and work-force housing. The fee was killed by a 3-2 vote, before the commission held any meetings on the proposal and with no advertised opportunity for public input. At the time, Commissioners Frank Halas and Jim Coletta raised concerns about the unpublicized vote, according to Daily News reports.

Then on Feb. 13, Henning called for an unpublicized vote to draft a permit application that would rival the city of Naples' proposed slow-speed zones on Naples Bay. Again, there was no public knowledge that this would be an agenda item and there was no opportunity for public input on this issue of great community concern.

We commend the Daily News for identifying these unpublicized votes and reporting on the situation. This is as much the story as the votes themselves, if not more.

A free press is a watchdog of democracy and this is an example of how important the press can be.

Similarly, we agree with Naples Mayor Bill Barnett's challenge of this unpublicized action. We applaud Commissioner Coletta's statement (in an e-mail to Mayor Barnett as reported in the Daily News): "While we may well be within our legal rights to conduct the people's business without due notice, it doesn't serve our citizens well when decisions are made on the fly without due notice." And we appreciate his putting discussion of this important matter on the agenda for Tuesday's County Commission meeting.

What happened to our commitment to conducting the people's business in the sunshine? Florida's Government-in-the-Sunshine Law applies when two or more members of the same elected or appointed public board or commission meet to discuss or take action on any matter which may foreseeably come before them in their official capacity. The Sunshine Law requires that: 1. meetings be open to the public; 2. notice be given; 3. minutes be taken.

These two votes were not taken in the sunshine.

Please join us in urging our commissioners to take action to ensure these out-of-the-sunshine votes do not continue. Call them at 774-8097 and let your voice be heard. For more information, contact me at 263-4656 or President@lwvcolliercounty.org

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