Call '911' – lawmaker stealing access in progress

By Jim Waters

State Sen. John Schickel, R-Union, claims he would never restrict the public's access to records. Yet that's exactly what he wants to do with his bill to ban the broadcast of "911" calls on TV, radio or the Internet.

Some "911" chatter can embarrass callers and capture highly emotional moments, Schickel said. His pandering to "privacy" advocates also includes a totally unfounded charge that broadcast outlets use replays of these calls to boost ratings. Show me the evidence, Mr. Schickel.

His bill represents nothing more than an end-run around the Kentucky Open Records Act — something a lot of politicians love to do and often justify by playing the "privacy" card. Too many lawmakers are willing to close public business faster than big bank CEOs can cash a bonus check.

The state open-records law doesn't require emergency dispatch centers to provide copies of these calls to the public *only* if the calls come without unpleasant content. Under the law, *all* calls become public.

The *public* makes the calls. The calls go to a *public* agency. *Public* agencies respond to the calls. And in fact, some of that unpleasant content reveals less-than-stellar performances by emergency dispatchers and law enforcement – a service to the *public*.

The bill smacks of silliness, poor logic and court challenges. It would ban the broadcast of *all* "911" calls, not just the "unpleasant" ones (courts: strike one). It targets broadcasters (courts: strike two). The same information in transcripts would still be available and the public could still listen to the tapes (courts: strike three.)

How about this: If the bill passed, we could listen to "re-enactors" reading the transcripts while trying to "mimic" reality, or we could read a writer's interpretation of how someone sounded.

Ridiculous.

Taxpayers deserve to know how government at any level works and the product of its work, including "911" calls. Sometimes that scrutiny involves unpleasantries. It certainly does when it exposes government leaders trying to hide inconvenient truths.

But crafty politicians know: The more the public knows, the more inconvenient it gets for them.

Example: The more folks who found Washington's big spenders wanted to mortgage our children's futures in order to spend nearly $1 billion alone just to build golf carts and provide coupons for digital-TV converter boxes, the less support remained for the plan.

Many lawmakers voted at 2 p.m. after only getting the stimulus bill at 11 p.m. the night before. In a Senate floor speech, Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., claimed, "The American people really don't care" about "those little tiny, yes, porky amendments."

If so, why the rush to pass the bill? And why is it that the more folks found out about the *real* plan for spending their money, the less support the bill got? Just like some of those "911" calls, seeing the "tiny, yes, porky" guts of this bill would have removed the appetite some have for more big government.

Meanwhile, Kentuckians who want to know what their government really does for them — and to them — still haven't seen the administration's promised Web site on how Kentucky spends taxpayer money. All Kentuckians can get now is a gaggle of confusing numbers. They should have convenient access to line-item spending: how much money goes to farmers' markets, shrimp farms and big arenas in small towns.

Only then can we the people know if shaky claims about "cutting all the fat that can possibly be cut" are true — claims made by "we-can't-wait-to-raise-your-taxes" political leaders in Frankfort. Taxpayers would get a clear understanding of that niggling "unpleasant" content Schickel likes to talks about.

 When it comes to government business – and "911" calls – as the late President Ronald Reagan said: "Trust, but verify."

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