



Title: **Openness has to be a priority**

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Openness has to be a priority

Holding public office can be thankless work, which is why elected officials deserve credit for their service.

Most have good intentions.

Still, we too often see situations where officials either don't know or understand guidelines in place to ensure citizens have access to the workings of their government.

Such was the case with the Garden City Community College Board of Trustees, which demonstrated a lack of understanding of the state's open meetings law by discussing business before the scheduled start of a recent meeting.

The Kansas Open Meetings Act (KOMA) prohibits discussion of public business outside of the designated meeting time and place.

While the GCCC board's June 26 meeting was set to begin at 7:30 a.m., trustees started addressing college affairs at least several minutes before that time with discussion of an insurance policy for GCCC student-athletes.

Starting the exchange early may not sound like much of an offense. Indeed, there was nothing to suggest the GCCC board set out to hide anything from citizens who may have planned to attend at the scheduled time, and would have missed out on part of the talks.

Regardless of the intent, the consequence of such activity is in potentially cheating citizens of an opportunity to hear discussion on issues involving their tax dollars and other matters of public interest.

Elected officials always



EDITOR'S NOTE

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should be mindful of why it's important to make sure the folks who pay the bills have access to their discussions, as a way to understand the thinking behind decision-making.

But after the meeting in question, GCCC trustees had conflicting accounts of what happened, when and if the meeting ever was called to order, and also seemed to brush off any possible missteps.

Most disappointing were comments from Trustee Melvin Neufeld, who served many years as a Kansas lawmaker and recently was hand-picked for the GCCC board in part because of that experience.

Yet Neufeld clearly didn't understand state law on open meetings when he said the trustees arrived early and began discussing an agenda item, but "nothing happened" — as if that was OK.

It wasn't.

Binding action or voting doesn't have to take place for a violation to occur. A board discussing any business of the governing body outside of the designated meeting time is prohibited.

Whether discussion ensued because trustees didn't know KOMA or simply didn't care, it was proof of the need for GCCC's board to pursue a better understanding of Kansas' open meetings law.

When it comes to open meetings and records, ignorance is a poor, yet common excuse when violations do occur.

The GCCC board isn't alone, of course. Many elected and nonelected public servants at the local and state levels need training on KOMA and the Kansas Open Records Act (KORA).

Details of open government laws and training materials are available on Kansas Attorney General Derek Schmidt's website, ksag.org, under Legal Services. The AG's office also offers occasional KOMA and KORA training sessions open to the public.

Every citizen should want to learn more.

Journalists have a responsibility to serve as watchdogs, but open government laws aren't in place simply to provide media access to governmental operations.

They exist for the public. People should understand laws designed to keep government transparent and accountable, and challenge their government if they suspect violations.

When public officials disregard open government laws, they give citizens cause to be suspicious — even when they have nothing to hide.

Consider the recent GCCC board slip-up a reminder of as much, and of the need for all officials to get up to speed on laws in place to protect the public's right to know.

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