

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

July 17, 2017

The Honorable Gina M. Raimondo
Office of the Governor
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Governor Raimondo:

We write to urge you to sign H 6323, An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government -- Open Meetings. This piece of legislation amends the Rhode Island Open Meetings Act (herein OMA) in two important ways. First, it excludes from the calculation of time required for advanced notice of meetings both weekends and holidays. Second, it requires municipal public bodies to post their minutes online, as is currently required of state public bodies. These are both significant improvements that advance the public interest and promote transparency in government.

The Rhode Island Open Meetings Act has not been changed substantially in almost two decades. Our groups, in preparing separate legislation (H 5856 and S 709), examined more than two decades of complaints, advisory opinions and lawsuits, concerning the OMA. We found frequent complaints related to insufficient notice, and lack of access to municipal meeting minutes. Put simply, the public cannot know what is being done in its name unless it can attend public meetings and see the results, and this legislation makes that more likely.

Additional evidence comes from the ACLU whose 2016 report on the Open Meetings Act found numerous problems with the current notice requirement in the OMA. The ACLU report cited many public bodies that published agendas for Monday meetings late on Friday afternoons. This practice denies the public the ability to access materials or ask questions related to the meeting. Furthermore, the report found more than a dozen instances when a meeting notice stated a time for members of the public to contact the public body for additional accommodation that had already expired by the time the notice was posted.

While we acknowledge that meeting these amended obligations will require a change in practice for public bodies, we believe the benefit far outweighs any burden. We note that when the General Assembly sought to define unfunded mandate in R.I.G.L. 45-13-10 (a), one of the first exceptions to that definition was "The notification and conduct of public meetings." Openness is, and should be, a priority of government at the state and municipal level.

Together our groups represent thousands of Rhode Islanders who value transparency in our government. We hope you sign H 6323 and show your support for open government in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

Linda Levin
President
ACCESS/RI

Steven Brown
Executive Director
ACLU of Rhode Island

John Marion
Executive Director
Common Cause Rhode Island

Jane Koster
President
League of Women Voters of Rhode Island

Justin Silverman
Executive Director
New England First Amendment Coalition

Professor John Pantalone
Chair, Journalism Department, University of Rhode Island

cc: Brett Smiley, Chief of Staff
Claire Richards, Executive Counsel