

# Sabattus lawmaker wants tougher public meeting laws

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LEWISTON — A state lawmaker is drafting a bill to clarify and strengthen laws designed to prevent elected officials from making public policy decisions out of the public eye.

The proposal was prompted by what Rep. Stacy Dostie, D-Sabattus, said was unethical behavior by the Sabattus Board of Selectmen, whose actions resulted in the resignation of the town manager.

"I want to clarify the laws so that one person talking to another person on the phone or via e-mail and making town decisions is illegal," Dostie said.

She said she believed three of the five Sabattus selectmen decided to tell Town Manager Gregory Gill that he should resign. The other selectmen were unaware of the decision and there was no public meeting to discuss the issue before Gill resigned last week, Dostie said. State Sen. John Nutting, D-Leeds, also made the allegation at a recent town meeting.

Dostie said she is working with members of the Right to Know Advisory Committee, which includes members of the press, state officials and other public advocates, to help draft her bill. Sun Journal Managing Editor Judy Meyer is on the committee.

"The problem is that decisions need to be made at a public forum, at a public meeting," said Mal Leary, a committee spokesman and a journalist who runs the Capitol News Service.

Leary said the committee had been discussing the issue of "serial" conversations and e-mails before the allegations in Sabattus and would be happy to work with Dostie in addressing the issue.

Serial phone calls, in which one selectman calls another with an idea, then that selectman calls another selectman, and a decision is reached, is a subversion of the public's right to know, Leary said.

"It undermines the fundamental nature of government transparency, and that is the ability of the public to watch their elected representatives do their business," he said.

Both Dostie and Leary mentioned the Lewiston City Council's firing of City Administrator Jim Bennett as another example of public officials conducting business outside the public realm. Bennett was recently named interim town manager of Sabattus.

Any bill proposed for the next legislative session must be approved by the Legislative Council because it is the short session and there is less time to process legislation.

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