

# Put public e-mails on the record

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There's a solution to the growing phenomenon of "serialized meetings" among elected officials: Make every e-mail they send or receive, that pertains to public business, part of the official record for public meetings.

If put where everyone can see them, people could see what their representatives have been saying to their peers, to city or town staffers, or to their constituents. This way, nothing can be done in the darkness, since it is being forced into the sunshine.

Rep. Stacy Dostie, D-Sabattus, has a new bill before the Legislature to stop "serialized meetings" that can occur via e-mail. (These pseudo-meetings occur when selectmen or councilors build consensus for decisions via e-mail, in violation of the spirit of Maine's open-meeting laws.)

This is a direct result of goings-on in her town regarding the departure of the town manager, Gregory Gill. In this case, decisions about Gill were essentially made via e-mail among selectmen. This is not right, yet so easy in this era of tweets, texts and forwards. Serial meetings should be punishable, but by then, the damage is done. How are they preventable?

Easy. Whenever a board of selectmen or city council is scheduled to meet and a packet of material is prepared, their e-mails about public business should be in the official record. If these e-mails contain nothing questionable, no harm is done.

And if they do, whatever it is can be addressed with proactive haste, instead of reactionary zeal.

Only one town — that we know of — does this. Bar Harbor regularly provides the e-mails of its selectmen (which was started through the laudable efforts of the Bangor Daily News.) Constituent questions, official chatter, public announcements ... all are detailed and available.

It's a brilliant idea. By having e-mails available for inspection, officials cannot misuse instant communication to skirt sunshine laws. While collection and dissemination of this material for some municipalities could be burdensome, we'd submit the alternative is worse.

Namely, the revelation of public e-mails — like what's happened in Lewiston, Sabattus, Rumford, etc. — that can show officials too willing to cross ethical, professional and statutory bounds when they think nobody is looking. Offering e-mails voluntarily would be a refreshing blast of honesty from municipalities, by both endorsing transparency and committing to ensure all their business is public.

Electronic communication, on the whole, is a frontier for public records laws. (Issues with social networking sites like Facebook, for example, are only now being explored.) The right strategy is

transparency. People shouldn't be wondering what their selectmen or city councilors (or legislators) are talking about via electronic means.

The public should know. Putting e-mails in the record does that.

[editorialboard@sunjournal.com](mailto:editorialboard@sunjournal.com)