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More roll calls needed

By Staff Reports · & 2008

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If you want to know how your state representatives or senators voted on an important bill, chances are you won't be able to find that information.

Why? Because the South Carolina General Assembly has lax roll call voting requirements and passes much of its legislation by voice vote.

Now, however, Gov. Mark Sanford and a group of legislators are calling for requirements that would force more roll call votes. The Republican governor and two lawmakers recently traveled to several South Carolina cities to rally public opinion behind the effort.

The move to require more roll call votes also has the support of House Speaker Bobby Harrell, R-Charleston -- but with a few reservations. Spending taxpayer money to take a roll call vote "on a resolution congratulating a state championship high school team is not true transparency," he said, "it's pandering."

But the reforms called for by supporters of more transparency strike a reasonable balance. A proposed bill would require roll calls on every section of the state budget and any bill getting a second reading, any amendments during the third and final reading or on compromise versions of bills from conference committees.

That would hold lawmakers accountable for votes on key bills. It also could help discourage last-minute pork-barrel spending tacked on to popular bills.

North Carolina already requires roll calls on second and third readings of all revenue bills. And states such as Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana and Mississippi require roll calls for third and final reading on all bills.

Rep. Nikki Haley, R-Lexington, a sponsor of the roll-call bill, said the bill wouldn't require roll calls on minor bills such as those cited by Harrell. But she worries that legislators will say roll calls aren't needed on unimportant issues -- and then have the final say on which issues are important.

Some lawmakers understandably would like to hide behind the anonymity of a voice vote. That way they never are held personally accountable for their votes.

But transparency breeds better government. And residents have a right to know where their elected officials stand on any vote that affects the public welfare or purse.

Most other states in the Southeast have at least minimum requirements for roll call votes. South Carolina needs to follow suit.

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